Australian Consumers' Association

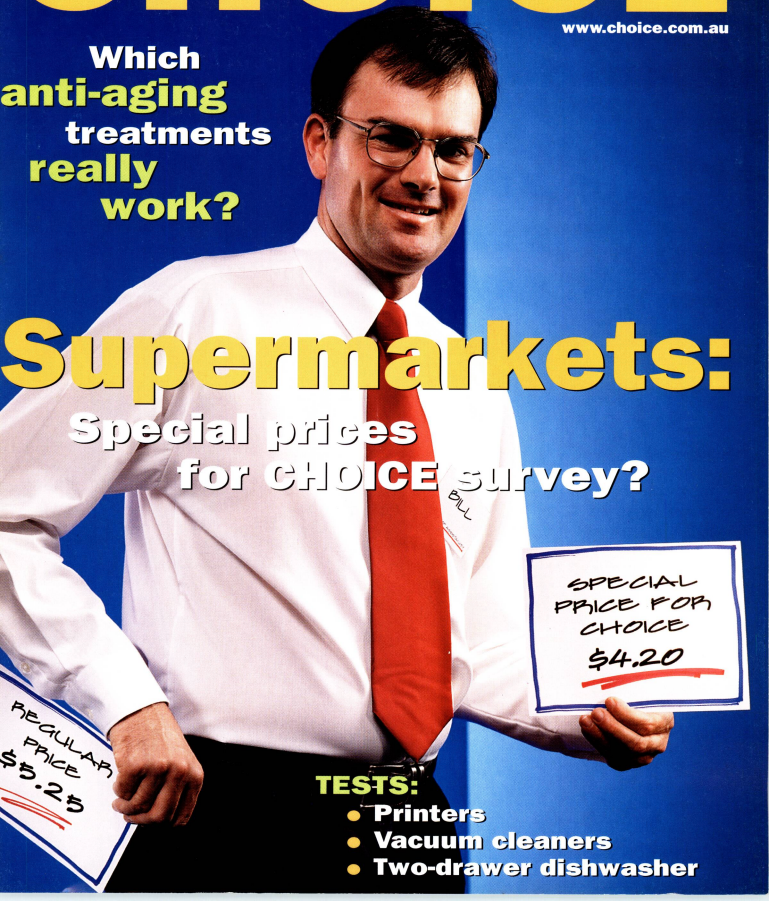
July 1998

CHOICE

www.choice.com.au

Which anti-aging treatments really work?

Supermarkets: Special prices for CHOICE survey?



TESTS:

- Printers
- Vacuum cleaners
- Two-drawer dishwasher

Special prices for CHOICE?

Jane Mackenzie

Our supermarket price survey (starting on page 8) has turned out rather differently from usual this year. We usually price the same products every time so we can see what's gone up or down in price over the years. However, this time we were given reason to believe that some supermarkets might be putting special cheaper prices on the goods in our 'basket' at the time we would be surveying.

To make sure we wouldn't be getting biased information, we changed the contents of the basket at the last minute, and it's the prices we found for this new basket that this year's comparisons of supermarket chains are based on.

But to satisfy our curiosity we also priced around half the items in the old basket in three cities — and then went back to the same 43 shops three weeks later and priced these items in both baskets again.

The findings were interesting. While only three of the stores had increased the price of the new basket by more than 10% (two by 11% and one by 13%), 11 had put up the price of the goods in the old basket by over 10%. These increases ranged from 13% to 25%.

That's a quarter of the stores we rechecked that had a much higher price for the old basket after the supermarkets thought we'd finished our survey, as opposed to only 7% for the new basket.

Maybe we just have suspicious minds, but it looks to us as if some supermarkets were trying to get a better price report than they deserved in our survey. Fortunately it hasn't worked — we're confident our new-basket results represent what you'll find when you go shopping, and that you can still use our survey to guide you towards best value.

Jane Mackenzie, Editor

Your letters

We welcome the letters you send us — please always include a daytime telephone number so we can contact you quickly if we want to follow up your letter. We're sorry we can't personally answer every letter we receive, but we do use them in our research. Thanks for taking the time to keep in touch.
Write to us at CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204.
Phone us on (02) 9577 3399.
Fax us on (02) 9577 3355.
email us at ausconsumer@choice.com.au
World Wide Web address: www.choice.com.au

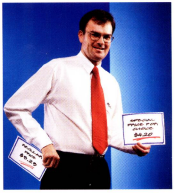
Contents

July 1998

Choice Cover story

8 **Supermarket survey**

Special prices for CHOICE?, left, explains the background to our latest supermarket price survey; the article itself also tells you which chains will save you the most money.



Cover photo: Kent Mears

Choice Regulars

4 **Choice Cuts**

Travelling safely in Europe; food additives; phone service guarantee; alcohol in mouthwash; Budget update on healthcare.

7 **Your Letters**

Reducing your bank fees; eggs' clean reputation; cockroach mats too effective?

14 **Bodywise: Laser eye surgery**

For some people it has the potential to deliver perfect vision. But there are risks, side effects and uncertainties you should know about if you're considering laser eye surgery.

16 **Computing Choice: Computer chaos**

There's been a spate of computer stores going bust lately, with computer owners losing their goods or money. What can you do if this happens to you?

32 **Drivelines: New car warranties**

If you don't follow the servicing schedule for your new car, you could end up voiding the warranty. What else do you need to know about warranties?

34 **Consumer Bookshelf**

48 **Recalls and bans**

51 **Choice index**

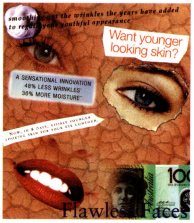
August 1997 – July 1998

Barrel cleaners may be easier to use on stairs, but they don't pick up nearly as much dirt as most uprights. *See page 37.*

Choice Reports

18 **Vanity, vain hopes and anti-aging treatments**

They lure us with 'scientific' claims, elegant packaging and even the price tag — after all, if anti-aging creams are that expensive, surely they must work? But are you simply wasting your money?



24 **10 ways to save the cost of your CHOICE subscription**

Look out for our Best Buys — good products at a good price.

Every month CHOICE provides information that can save you money and strife. Here are 10 of the many ways you can save the cost of your subscription.

26 **Tainted information**

You probably trust your favourite newspaper or TV show to give you truthful, unbiased information. Unfortunately, though, you're unlikely to be able to tell if it doesn't. This article looks at the various ways information can become tainted.

52 **Biting the dust**

Agricultural investments with a tax break have a high-risk reputation, so what should you watch out for if a scheme looks attractive?

Choice Tests

17 **Two-drawer dishwasher**

It may look like a filing cabinet, but the new FISHER & PAYKEL two-drawer dishwasher is truly versatile, if somewhat pricy. We tested it to compare it with standard models reported on last year.

37 **Dirt busters**

Vacuum cleaners around the $200 mark compared well with their pricier counterparts from earlier tests.

42 **Impressive inkjets and lively lasers**

Are you looking for a printer to use at home? We tested a range of affordable lasers and inkjets that will do a variety of high-quality jobs, from printing straight text to full-colour illustrations.

Coming in the next three issues:

Tests: Sanders, plastic storage containers, salad dressings and mayonnaise, clothes dryers, window cleaners, washing machines, mould removers, batteries, lipstick, ceiling fans, pharmacy vs supermarket prices, financial planners.

Reports: Health insurance, how to dispose safely of household chemicals, product safety, cheap STD phone calls, security screen doors, what's in your diet, options for cooling your home.

We try to bring you tests and reports in the planned month, but sometimes have to move an article because of problems that occur during testing and research, or for lack of space in a particular issue. We apologise if this causes any inconvenience.

◀ *If you don't want this happening to your lunch, read our upcoming test of plastic storage containers.*

CHOICE*cuts*

How safe are Europe's airports and ferries?

IF YOU'RE PLANNING A HOLIDAY IN Europe, the safety of transport systems over there probably isn't your main worry and, for most countries, rightly so. Fortunately, disasters like the Düsseldorf airport fire in 1996 (where 17 people died) or the sinking of the Baltic Sea ferry *Estonia* in 1994 (852 victims) are rare in Europe.

Nevertheless, how well an airport or a ferry is prepared for such a crisis can affect how many people may be injured or killed, and the extent of damage caused.

Our European partner organisations, with financial assistance from the EU, assessed the safety of 34 European airport buildings and 75 ferries that operate in the Mediterranean, the North Sea and the Baltic Sea.

■ **Ferries** were assessed anonymously by a nautical expert according to international *Safety Of Life At Sea* (SOLAS) guidelines. The expert checked the safety and rescue equipment on board, how easy it is to evacuate the ferries, their fire safety, the safety information available on board and the overall impression of the ferry.

Flooding through open bow doors on ro-ro ferries has been the cause of two major accidents since 1987.

All the North Sea and Baltic Sea ferries tested (including Channel and modern high-speed ferries) received a 'satisfactory' or 'good' overall safety rating. The main problem was missing lights and whistles on safety vests — probably taken as souvenirs by passengers.

Mediterranean ferries are a different story. Only two out of 26 rated 'good', while four showed so many severe safety flaws that they shouldn't be operating: the Greek ferries *Express Apollon* (from Piraeus to Paros), *Milos Express* (from Piraeus to Sifnos) and *Lissos* (from Piraeus to Chania), and the Italian *Sardinia Vera* (from Civitavecchia to Golfo Aranci).

■ **Airports** were inspected officially and with the assistance of the airport operators. The inspectors assessed the fire safety and how easy it is to evacuate the airports.

Only three buildings received an overall 'good' safety result: Stockholm (Sweden) and the German airports in Munich and Düsseldorf (which was completely redesigned after the 1996 fire).

Serious safety problems were found in nine airports — they received a 'poor' or 'very poor' overall rating: Hanover (Germany), Athens, Heraklion and Thessaloniki (Greece), Barcelona and Madrid (Spain), and Lisbon, Faro and Funchal (Portugal).

Dublin offers only 'poor' fire safety but is relatively easy to evacuate. Five other buildings (among them the major international airports of Frankfurt/Main and Amsterdam) offer 'good' or 'satisfactory' fire safety — however, in a fire, they'd be difficult to evacuate.

Other major airports, such as London-Heathrow, Paris and Rome were rated 'satisfactory'.

Food – what's been added?

HAVE YOU EVER READ A FOOD LABEL AND MADE NO SENSE out of the numbers given for food additives in the product? Subscribers ask us regularly about a 'code breaker'.

While manufacturers are obliged to identify on the product label any additives used in a food, they don't have to be listed by name — food additive numbers and class names are legally sufficient. So it's more common to find listings such as *food acid (330)* than the name of the actual ingredient: *citric acid*, for example. If you're sensitive to certain additives, this can be a problem. You need to know what the numbers on the packet mean.

We can't list all the food additives approved in Australia — the list is too long; but the Australia New Zealand Food Authority has produced an updated version of its booklet *508 — What's that? Identifying food additives*, which lists the internationally established food additive numbers in numerical order. (Incidentally, if the number you're looking for has the prefix 'E', it simply means the additive has been approved by the European Union.) The booklet is free, and available from Australian Government Bookshops in all capital cities. Look in your White Pages.

If you suffer from asthma you should be wary of foods containing high levels of sulphites or sulphur dioxide, to which some people are sensitive. Look out for additive numbers 220–228, particularly in foods such as fruit juice or drink, wine, dried fruit and delicatessen meat.

Phone service guarantee

YOU ARE LEGALLY ENTITLED TO FINANCIAL compensation when a phone company fails to meet certain performance requirements relating to the time taken to connect standard services, repair a fault, or keep an appointment. This is known as the Customer Service Guarantee (CSG), and both the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman and the Australian Communications Authority believe consumers are not exercising this right as often as they could.

Phone companies must pay the equivalent of the monthly rental fee for the standard telephone service for each working day a connection or repair is delayed beyond the times outlined in the tables, below. This also applies when the phone company misses an appointment (an appointment is deemed to be missed when the company fails to show up within 15 minutes of the agreed time).

In certain circumstances phone companies are exempt — when a storm causes mass disruptions to phone services, for example.

Any complaints about a breach of these performance standards should be directed to the phone company. If the complaint is unresolved, refer the matter to the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman on 1800 062 058.

Customer Service Guarantee (CSG)

TABLE 1. Connection time

Type of connection	Time from customer request
In-place connection	
A home or business connection that needs no cabling or other infrastructure	Within 3 working days
Close to available cabling or other infrastructure	
Area with more than 10,000 people	Within 1 week
2500 to 10,000 people	Within 2 weeks
Fewer than 2500 people	Within 8 weeks
Not close to available cabling or other infrastructure	
Area with more than 2500 people	Within 4 weeks
Between 200 and 2500 people	Within 26 weeks
Fewer than 200 people	Within 12 months

TABLE 2. Time for repair

Location	Time after receipt of report
Metropolitan **(A)**	End of next working day
Rural **(B, C)**	End of second working day
Remote **(B, D)**	End of third working day

(A) Metropolitan areas are defined as locations within 30 km of one of the service provider's restoration centres.

(B) In certain situations, including where the fault occurs due to an administrative error by the company or when the fault can be rectified without the phone company attending customer premises or undertaking external plant work, the repair must be done by the end of next the working day after report of the fault.

(C) Rural areas are defined as outside metropolitan areas and major or large urban centres (population greater than 10,000).

(D) Remote areas are defined as areas located in extended-charging zones, as defined by Telstra.

Update

Super advice for women

June 1998, *Choice Cuts*

If you're interested in the *Women in Super* factsheets mentioned in June CHOICE, you need to call the Association of Superannuation Funds of Australia (ASFA) on (02) 9264 9300, not the number we previously gave. You can also find the information at www.superannuation.asn.au.

Bartender: one mouthwash straight up

IT MAY SURPRISE YOU TO KNOW that some mouthwashes are up to 26% alcohol. While the instructions on the bottle explain that the mouthwash shouldn't be swallowed, the warnings aren't always prominently displayed, and are useless for children who can't yet read.

It takes only a few mouthfuls of a high-alcohol mouthwash to produce a toxic reaction in children. Because of its unappealing taste, children tend not to drink enough to have a serious effect, and very few incidents have resulted in a visit to hospital. However, the alcohol in mouthwash can cause seizures, put them into a coma — which happened to a two-year-old girl last year — or even kill them.

CHOICE is concerned that very few mouthwash labels carry warnings to keep the bottle out of reach of children, and none of the popular brands we checked had child-resistant lids. One alcoholic mouthwash is packaged in what looks like a pop-top sports-drink bottle!

We'd like to see prominent warnings and child-resistant caps on all bottles.

If you use mouthwash, make sure it's stored safely and out of reach of children, or choose one that's alcohol-free.

Corrections

51 cm televisions

May 1998

In the profiles on page 33 the picture next to the description of the **PANASONIC TC-51M75A** did not show that model. The correct Panasonic is shown on the right.

The dirt on spuds

June 1998

On page 8 in *What's the damage?* we said that 50% of bags were underweight, *more than half* of these by 50 g or more. We should have said that 50% of bags were underweight, *about half* of these by 50 g or more.

Healthcare: What Budget changes mean for you

IN BRIEF

- GPs will receive more under Medicare as an encouragement to bulk bill.
- Higher income limits apply to be eligible for a Commonwealth Senior's Health Card.
- Some extra help for home carers will be provided — but not enough.
- Problems consumers have with private health insurance still need fixing before membership is likely to increase, despite the government's incentives.

SOME FUNDING CHANGES ANNOUNCED IN the recent federal Budget may improve your access to affordable medicines, GP visits and care in the home.

More pharmacies will also be funded to process Medicare claims in rural areas. However, the Budget does little to improve access to dental care for low-income Australians, nor does it provide adequate funds for improving nursing home facilities, according to aged-care groups. The level of funding of public hospitals is still being hotly debated by governments.

GPs and bulk billing

Under the Budget changes, GPs will receive more under Medicare to help with rising practice costs and to encourage bulk billing. Around 80% of GP visits are currently bulk billed, which means you don't have to pay for your visit.

Some doctor groups claim the increased government funding is not enough to stop doctors who are feeling the pinch from dropping bulk billing. A close watch on bulk-billing rates over the next year will be needed to see if the increased funding has worked.

The government is also providing incentives for more doctors to work out of the same practice, which could help reduce costs and provide a greater range of patient services in the one place.

Cheaper medicines

If you're paying for your own retirement (not receiving a government pension) and are on a taxable income of up to $40,000 for singles and $67,000 for couples, you're now eligible for a Commonwealth Seniors' Health Card. Previously the card was only available to those on incomes of up to $21,320 for singles and $35,620 for couples.

From January 1 next year this means more self-funded retirees will pay only $3.20 for each prescription medicine covered by the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme, and be eligible for free medicines after spending $166.40 in a calendar year. Anyone who holds a card issued by Centrelink is already eligible for these benefits.

Care in the home

The Budget funds a package that provides some much needed help to those caring for someone in the home, including:

- Increased funding for respite care and a 5% increase in funding for the Home and Community Care (HACC) program.
- More resources for Aged Care Assessment teams.
- A new Carers' Allowance, combining the existing Domiciliary Nursing Care Benefit and Child Disability Allowance. It will be available from July 1999 to those currently eligible for the old benefits and is planned to be extended to people caring for those with high care needs, but who don't necessarily require ongoing nursing care.

Groups representing older Australians and carers say the increased funding is not enough. Other assistance that carers need includes:

- Income support, which at the very least should be aligned with the basic wage.
- Greater availability of respite and other home care services, tailored to the needs of both the carer and the person cared for, and at an affordable price.

Private health insurance

The tax rebate for lower-income Australians who take out private health insurance, and the tax penalty for those on higher incomes who don't are here to stay, despite their failure to entice more people into private health insurance.

Further incentives and penalties to encourage people into private health insurance were not part of this Budget, but the government is still considering measures in the lead-up to the federal election.

A tax exemption for employers offering private health insurance to their employees is being considered. But experience in the US, where such exemptions exist, highlights the problems. In the US:

- Large businesses negotiate good deals at the expense of small businesses and the self-employed.
- Employee choice is often limited to one or two health funds.
- The cost of healthcare is still on the rise.

CHOICE rejects the need for any further measures to prop up private health insurance. Rather than pushing more people in that direction, the government should be encouraging the private funds, hospitals and doctors to work together to solve the problems you've told us you have with private cover — rising premiums, gap payments for medical fees and multiple bills after hospitalisation. Any extra government funds would be better spent directly on health services. ❑

Reducing your bank fees

I've read your article on bank fees (CHOICE, March 1998) and thought I'd let you in on my system of avoiding them: get a Visa debit card, which works just like a normal credit card, but instead of using the 'bank's' money, you're using your own (you can only spend up to the amount you've paid into the debit card account).

With a debit card you can avoid debits tax on your withdrawals, because you don't need a cheque book facility any more — most bills can be paid with the debit card.

You may also be able to reduce transaction fees by using the debit card rather than EFTPOS. For instance, if you're currently paying for your weekly shopping by EFTPOS, you may (depending on your bank) be incurring fees for 'other ATM' transactions. Use the debit card instead and there won't be any fees.

I'm the sort of person who hates to carry a lot of cash, and used to pay astronomical charges for the use of 'other ATMs' and the cheques I constantly wrote. Now I pay all my bills over the phone on my debit card — saving money and time (it only takes a few minutes over the phone). I look at it as if I have beaten the system.

Michelle Muller
via Internet

While a Visa debit card can help you reduce your banking fees, it may be difficult to get. It isn't available from any of the 'Big 4' (ANZ, Commonwealth, National and Westpac), but only from a number of credit unions and the following regional banks: Adelaide, BNZA, Bendigo, Colonial State, Metway, St George and Suncorp.

However, you can get all of the above benefits from a credit card — as long as you make sure you pay off the balance straightaway.

Cockroach mats too effective?

In CHOICE, November 1993, you recommended **DEAD END** cockroach mats as an effective control measure for cockroaches.

We found this product to be spectacularly effective. For a number of years it completely removed a low-level but persistent cockroach problem.

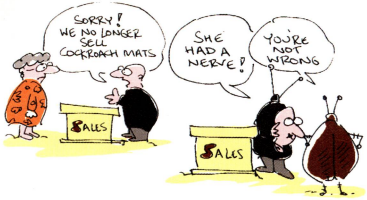
The mats were always difficult to find — only a few major grocery chains sold them. At the end of 1996, we couldn't get them at all any more, but found a similar mat produced by S C Johnson under the **RAID** brand name. This product too was very effective, but has also disappeared from the shelves.

What has happened? Is this a case of a product being too successful and therefore removed from the market in order to protect less effective but more profitable products?

Jeff Smith
via Internet

We contacted S C Johnson, which told us its cockroach mat was discontinued about six months ago because it didn't sell enough to justify keeping it. However, if market research shows sufficient demand, the company may reintroduce the product.

We're not aware of any similar product currently on the market.



Eggs' clean reputation

I refer to the article in the April 1998 edition of CHOICE in relation to antibiotic resistance and in particular the article on the antibiotic avoparcin.

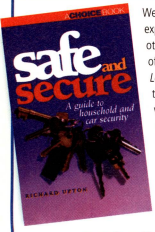
The article states that "avoparcin is used ... as a growth promoter in animals, mainly for intensively reared ones such as pigs and poultry". This statement will probably be interpreted by consumers as applying to the egg industry. Avoparcin is not used in hens [that lay eggs].

Antibiotics are used sparingly in the egg industry. They are only used under veterinary prescription. A withholding period is applied where deemed appropriate by the responsible authorities. This policy has the full support of the Australian Egg Industry Association. The results for eggs, which have been monitored through the Commonwealth Government's National Residue Survey over many years, demonstrate the clean reputation of eggs.

Hugh McMaster
Executive Director, Australian Egg Industry Association
Hurstville, NSW

Avoparcin is indeed not used in laying hens. Our apologies to the Egg Industry Association if statements in our article implied such use. However, it is used by the poultry industry with broiler chickens, which are reared for consumption at an early age. As the Australian Chicken Meat Federation informed us, avoparcin is a digestion enhancer, a type of antibiotic reserved only for animal use that enables the bird to digest its feed better. ❑

LETTER OF THE MONTH



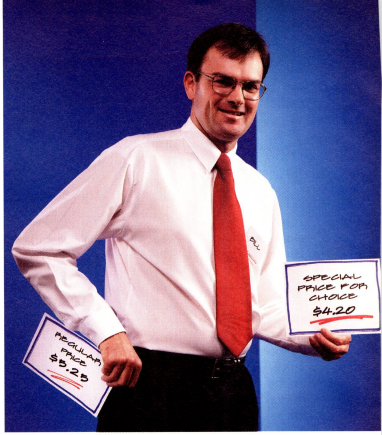
We want to hear from you — your experiences help our research and often let other readers know about scams and rip-offs. To thank you for writing to us, *Your Letters* awards a prize of a CHOICE book to the 'Letter of the month'. This month's winner, Jeff Smith of North Haven, NSW, receives *Safe and Secure*, which explains how to make your home, your car and yourself safer, with practical tips on improving your security cheaply and effectively.

We're sorry we don't have the resources to answer all your letters personally, and in the magazine we may edit them or print only an extract. See page 2 for how to reach us.

SUPERMARKET SURVEY

Getting the edge on prices

It seems our supermarket price survey makes stores anxious to do well — to the extent that they alter prices when they think we're coming.



IN BRIEF

- Supermarket chains are intensely competitive — so much so that this year we changed the products we were pricing so the stores didn't have the chance to turn them into 'specials' or otherwise adjust their prices.
- The new baskets of goods produced reliable price comparisons that tell you where it's cheapest to shop — see *Cheapest chains* on page 10.

IN THE LEAD-UP TO CHOICE'S SUPERmarket price survey, information came our way that suggested some major supermarket chains were going to lower their prices when they thought we were coming.

Even though you'd expect them to compete with each other, we thought it was a bit much for them to try to manipulate the survey results like this, so we devised a whole new list of goods to price (which we've called the 'new' basket) and made sure they didn't know about it. These are the prices the results of this year's survey are based on (see pages 10 to 11), so we're confident they reflect reality.

Normally we keep the same products in the baskets for several years in order to make price comparisons over time — and this is how the supermarkets know which items to focus on. Because of the change in products, this year you won't have that comparative price information. See *Our survey*, below, for more background on how it operates.

The prices were still collected at the time the supermarkets were expecting us, and out of curiosity we also priced half the contents of the old 1996 basket of brand-name goods in three of the cities we surveyed (43 stores in all). Then we went back three weeks later to the same stores and priced the same sample of goods from the old basket, plus a similar sample from the new basket, to see if the prices had gone up.

While only three of these stores had increased the price of the items in the new basket by more than 10% (two by 11% and one by 13%), 11 — a quarter — had put up the price of the goods in the old basket by 13% to 25%. (See the table on the right for the full list of price differences between our first and second checks.)

"It's just competition"

When we asked the three major chains — FRANKLINS, COLES and WOOLWORTHS/SAFEWAY — for their comments on the discrepancy between price changes in the two baskets, they all suggested that normal local competition could account for price changes even as high as 25%. As COLES expressed it, "Our stores are in constant competition with our neighbouring competitors. This occurs daily and weekly throughout the year. On occasions this even occurs hourly. We respond to market forces."

While we acknowledge the reality of competition, we still find it interesting that it focused so strongly in this case on the products in our old basket that were known to the supermarkets. The comments on the right from the three major chains validate our decision to base this year's survey on a new basket of goods — and provide an interesting insight into the way the major supermarket chains operate.

Our survey

Over two days in April we surveyed prices from 148 supermarkets in 24 cities and towns throughout Australia.

As in previous years, we priced two baskets of goods in each store. One contained 30 brand-name products; the other contained the same products, but looked at the cheapest brand available. The products were food and grocery items a typical family might buy regularly in a supermarket: canned and dry food, dairy goods, coffee,

coles

"Not surprisingly (given the prior notice), we have observed, over the years, that during the period of the survey, prices of some of our competitors are reduced to levels we regard as unrealistic, only to rise again shortly after the end of the survey period...

"[This year] we decided we had no commercial option but to match our competitors, even at unrealistic [price] levels, during this survey period.

"During the announced period of the survey, as our competitors' prices went down, we matched them. After the survey period prices returned to more realistic levels."

FRANKLINS BigFresh

"It must be understood that Franklins not only 'follows the market' when it needs to, but also has a proactive, aggressive policy on specials and promotions, in keeping with our determination to be the lowest-cost supermarket operator nationally."

'The Fresh Food People' WOOLWORTHS

"Our policy is to be competitive in each marketplace, which means moving sell prices up and down, reacting to the marketplace when required. It is also our policy in certain stores to feature additional specials to simply match a strong competitor's activities."

As well as statements like those quoted above from some of the supermarkets, this table convinced us that changing the contents of the basket for the latest survey gave a more realistic set of prices on which to base its conclusions.

It shows the differences in price for 15 items from each of the old and new brand-name baskets between our first announced visit and our second one, unannounced, three weeks later. There were more and higher price rises for the items from the old basket (which were known to the supermarkets) than for those from the new ones (which weren't).

Price differences between earlier and later price checks

Store (in order of % difference, old basket)	New basket* (first check)	New basket* (second check)	% Difference	Old basket* (first check)	Old basket* (second check)	% Difference
Woolworths, Unley, SA	36.22	35.96	–1	45.40	41.16	–9
Woolworths, Parabanks SC, Salisbury, SA	36.35	36.07	–1	43.63	41.16	–6
Coles, Campbelltown Mall SC, Campbelltown, NSW	36.22	36.59	1	44.30	42.49	–4
SuperJ Warehouse Store, Mt Druitt, NSW	36.41	36.86	1	45.84	44.60	–3
Jewel Warehouse Store, Werribee, Vic	38.14	37.73	–1	47.11	45.86	–3
Bi-Lo, Croydon, Vic	37.16	38.42	3	47.16	45.98	–2
Jewel Food Barn, Ferntree Gully, Vic	38.27	37.79	–1	46.53	45.98	–1
Franklins, Miranda Fair SC, Miranda, NSW	33.70	35.24	5	39.07	38.78	–1
Jewel Warehouse Store, C'town Market Place, NSW	36.66	36.71	0	46.09	45.90	0
Safeway, Ferntree Gully, Vic	36.66	37.16	1	46.64	46.45	0
Safeway, Croydon, Vic	36.66	37.16	1	46.59	46.45	0
Safeway, Cranbourne, Vic	36.66	37.16	1	46.54	46.45	0
Jewel Country Fresh, Croydon, Vic	38.20	38.07	0	47.13	47.05	0
Jewel Food Barn, Marrickville Metro SC, M'ville, NSW	39.00	38.93	0	48.38	48.31	0
Safeway, Werribee, Vic	36.66	37.16	1	46.49	46.45	0
Franklins, Neutral Bay, NSW	38.76	37.08	–4	43.02	43.41	1
Coles, Mount Druitt SC, Mt Druitt, NSW	36.80	35.60	–3	36.98	37.34	1
Franklins, Marketown, Mt Druitt, NSW	35.13	35.33	1	36.98	37.39	1
Coles, Castle Tower SC, Castle Hill, NSW	37.32	37.59	1	45.19	46.40	3
Franklins, Unley, SA	35.82	34.35	–4	41.11	42.88	4
Coles, Big Bear SC, Neutral Bay, NSW	38.08	38.85	2	46.86	48.88	4
Woolworths, Marketown, Mt Druitt, NSW	35.87	35.85	0	41.34	43.13	4
Coles, Hollywood Plaza, Salisbury Downs, SA	36.54	36.60	0	41.50	43.68	5
Coles, Old Port Canal SC, Port Adelaide, SA	36.52	36.43	0	41.60	43.80	5
Coles, Cranbourne Park SC, Cranbourne, Vic	36.77	37.91	3	44.94	47.47	6
Coles, Unley SC, Unley, SA	36.52	36.70	0	41.59	44.00	6
Bi-Lo, Port Adelaide, SA	32.68	36.31	11	40.85	43.26	6
Bi-Lo, Parabanks SC, Salisbury, SA	33.94	36.36	7	40.79	43.21	6
Coles, Croydon Market SC, Vic	37.55	36.29	–3	44.53	47.22	6
Woolworths, Macarthur Square, Campbeltown, NSW	37.12	37.03	0	42.50	45.51	7
Woolworths, Marrickville, NSW	36.20	37.03	2	42.50	45.67	7
Franklins, Macarthur Square, C'town, NSW	35.49	35.61	0	39.95	43.45	9
Coles, Parkside Plaza SC, Miranda, NSW	37.69	38.54	2	38.71	43.72	13
Woolworths, Neutral Bay, NSW	38.75	39.11	1	43.54	49.23	13
Woolworths, Miranda Fair SC, Miranda, NSW	38.82	39.11	1	43.54	49.23	13
Franklins, Marrickville Metro SC, M'ville, NSW	37.04	34.91	–6	40.44	46.40	15
Franklins, Werribee Plaza SC, Werribee, Vic	35.66	37.69	6	38.51	44.64	16
Franklins, Castle Tower SC, Castle Hill, NSW	32.53	36.15	11	39.47	46.42	18
Safeway, Preston, Vic	37.06	37.16	0	39.15	46.45	19
Coles, Werribee Plaza SC, Hoppers Crossing, Vic	37.57	37.02	–1	39.56	47.44	20
Coles, Mountain Gate SC, Ferntree Gully, Vic	37.35	37.07	–1	37.30	45.58	22
Franklins, Northland SC, Preston, Vic	33.39	37.60	13	35.81	43.88	23
Coles, Northland SC, Preston, Vic	37.20	37.48	–1	37.14	46.46	25

* Only 15 items from each brand-name basket were included in this analysis.

SC Shopping centre.
Franklins includes Big Fresh, Fresh and No Frills stores.

cereal, cat and dog food, toilet paper, detergent, etc. Because they're different from the products in our last survey in 1996 (for reasons explained on the left), we can't draw any price comparisons between the two surveys.

In the past we've written to each chain to ask permission for our pricers to do the survey in their stores. This saved us the cost of anonymously buying around 300 baskets of goods, and ensured the pricers wouldn't suffer any hassles. We didn't say exactly when we'd be surveying, but the stores knew to within a couple of months when it would be.

They also knew what goods we'd be pricing, because we publish that each year in CHOICE, along with a table comparing prices for each product with those in the previous survey.

Future surveys will be unannounced, at unpredictable intervals, and with baskets of goods that we'll vary as appropriate.

While we're confident that the conclusions (overleaf), based on our new baskets, represent the actual pricing relationships between the supermarket chains, we did find some anomalies that led us to exclude nine supermarkets from our results — see *How special?* on page 11 for details. Our conclusions are therefore based on prices from 139 supermarkets.

The survey results: Where are the savings?

IN BRIEF

- Cheapest chain: Franklins.
- Cheapest city: Newcastle.
- Cheapest states: SA, Queensland and NSW.
- Most expensive cities: Hobart and Launceston.
- Most expensive state: Tasmania.

What's in a name? The price, for one. Our survey showed that buying the cheapest available item instead of a particular brand-name product would have saved, on average, over $23 for the basket of goods we priced.

FRANKLINS, Newcastle and Tasmania. It's becoming a familiar refrain. As with our previous survey in 1996, in this year's new (and significantly revised) one FRANKLINS is again the cheapest chain and Newcastle still has the lowest prices of all the cities we surveyed. Likewise, the residents of Tasmania — along with those from the NT and WA — continue to pay a premium for living where they do.

Comparing the chains

Most of the 139 supermarkets we included in our survey results belong to one of six major chains. To determine how these big players stack up against one another, we compared their average prices for the brand-name and 'cheapest available' baskets we surveyed. For more on what we did, see *Our survey*, page 8.

FRANKLINS repeated its 1996 performance and came away with the lowest average price (taking into account all the stores surveyed across the country) for both baskets.

- Its average price for the brand-name basket was about $71, which was around $5 or $6 cheaper than the average prices at the three major chains that emerged at the other end of the scale: COLES, WOOLWORTHS and JEWEL.
- For the cheapest available basket, FRANKLINS was clearly set apart from the rest of the group, with an average price lower than $47 — 11% cheaper than the overall average.

Cheapest chains, below left, shows how all the major chains compared when we looked at the national average price of each basket.

How competitive are they?

To make our conclusions more meaningful, where possible we survey localised clusters of supermarkets in each of the 24 cities and towns visited. This means stores in those places are being compared against others with customers from the same demographic area.

It also means the survey sometimes shows localised competition in progress: one store lowers or raises its prices, so the others tend to follow suit. These price movements mean the prices found on the day each supermarket was surveyed can only be a snapshot of conditions at that particular time — a week earlier or later could make a difference to the actual basket prices.

That's why our cheapest and most expensive supermarket chains are based on the *average* prices of the baskets across all the stores of each chain surveyed around the country.

The actual basket prices are on pages 12 and 13. In most cities and for both baskets, the difference between the cheapest and most expensive store wasn't more than about $10. A local price adjustment of just a few per cent could close or widen the difference between individual stores from week to week, so use these tables as a rough guide only.

What's more, price is only one factor people use when choosing which supermarket to shop at. You might prefer one over another because it has easier parking, wider aisles or a better range of products for your shopping needs, for example. But if you don't have any special preferences, use *Cheapest chains*, left, as a guide.

Cheapest chains

Chain (number of stores surveyed)	Average cost of brand-name basket ($)	% cheaper or more expensive than average	Average cost of cheapest available basket ($)	% cheaper or more expensive than average
FRANKLINS (22)	71.61	6% cheaper	46.58	11% cheaper
BI-LO (7)	73.11	4% cheaper	52.48	1% more expensive
SAFEWAY (9)	75.72	Average	53.61	3% more expensive
COLES (44)	76.93	1% more expensive	54.09	4% more expensive
WOOLWORTHS (32)	77.14	2% more expensive	52.49	1% more expensive
JEWEL (13)	77.44	2% more expensive	52.57	1% more expensive

Franklins includes Big Fresh, Fresh and No Frills stores.

City to city

Since 1991, all our supermarket surveys have included cities in the NT, Tasmania and WA. These cities — without fail — end up being the most expensive.

With many of the big national manufacturers based in Sydney or Melbourne, much of this cost difference comes from transportation costs. A price is paid for crossing Bass Strait, the Nullarbor Plain or the dry ocean of outback between Darwin and any other capital — "the diseconomies of distance", as Ken Henrick, assistant director of the Australian Supermarket Institute, puts it.

In addition to vast distances, these areas suffer from a lack of two-way trade. Because these destinations are not themselves major national producers or distributors, containers go there full of cargo, but return empty or only partly full. The transportation costs reflect the imbalance.

To some extent these high prices are also the result of a lack of competition. Subha Narayanan, marketing and research editor of *Retail World*, says, "The biggest single factor is that these markets are lacking a committed, dedicated discounter of the kind found in the eastern states and SA. There are some independent stores that position themselves as discounters, but they simply don't have the economies of scale or buying power to be as aggressive as the discount supermarkets in other capitals."

The size of the markets in the NT and Tasmania makes it hard to expect the same level of competition you would find in, say, Sydney. According to *Retail World*, the total food revenue from Australian supermarkets and grocery stores amounted to over $36 billion in 1997. NSW accounted for about 31% of this sum, completely eclipsing Tasmania's 2.6% share and the NT's 1.6%.

Cheapest cities

Brand-name basket

Rank	Location	Average price ($)
1	Newcastle	71.25
2	Adelaide	72.77
3	Bendigo	73.64
4	Central Coast	74.16
5	Brisbane	74.34
6	Wollongong	74.48
7	Sydney	74.94
8	Toowoomba	75.21
9	Gold Coast	75.69
10	Melbourne	75.76
11	Ballarat	76.71
12	Canberra	76.74
13	Orange	77.04
14	Whyalla	77.16
15	Wagga Wagga	77.32
16	Geelong	77.40
17	Cairns	77.47
18	Tamworth	78.09
19	Bunbury	78.54
20	Perth	79.83
21	Darwin	80.68
22	Rockingham	81.64
23	Launceston	86.12
24	Hobart	86.48

Cheapest available basket

Rank	Location	Average price ($)
1	Newcastle	48.04
2	Central Coast	48.66
3	Sydney	48.81
4	Adelaide	49.38
5	Toowoomba	49.79
6	Ballarat	50.00
7	Gold Coast	50.69
8	Bendigo	50.89
9	Brisbane	50.92
10	Orange	50.93
11	Canberra	50.97
12	Wollongong	51.74
13	Melbourne	52.61
14	Cairns	52.75
15	Wagga Wagga	53.09
16	Whyalla	55.91
17	Tamworth	56.29
18	Geelong	57.61
19	Perth	57.98
20	Bunbury	58.82
21	Darwin	59.56
22	Rockingham	62.27
23	Launceston	63.00
24	Hobart	64.06

How special?

On average, the stores had marked as 'special' about 20% of the items we priced, but a handful of supermarkets exceeded this average by an extraordinary amount.

The nine supermarkets listed on the right were removed from our survey after statistical analysis confirmed that the percentages of specials in one or another (or sometimes both) of their baskets were remarkably high compared to all the other stores in the survey. As such, we were concerned that their prices did not accurately reflect what consumers would typically find.

Out of interest, we revisited one of these stores about four weeks after our survey and priced the brand-name basket again. We found a dramatic drop in the percentage of specials and a corresponding increase in the total price of the basket. This example illustrates the extent to which supermarket prices can fluctuate over a brief period of time.

How much on special?

Supermarkets removed due to an unusually high percentage of specials	Brand basket items on special (%)	Cheapest available items on special (%)
Franklins, Salisbury Downs, Adelaide, SA	73	13
Franklins, Clifford Gardens, Toowoomba, Qld	67	67
Franklins, Ballarat, Vic	67	30
Franklins, Port Adelaide, SA	63	17
Franklins, Stafford, Brisbane, Qld	60	60
Bi-Lo, Werribee, Vic	53	7
Franklins, Cranbourne, Vic	50	40
Woolworths, Bunbury, WA	33	50
Franklins, Earlville, Cairns, Qld	30	50
Overall survey average	*22*	*19*

Franklins includes Big Fresh, Fresh and No Frills stores.

SUPERMARKET SURVEY

Brand-name basket

ADELAIDE

1 Bi-Lo, Port Adelaide	$67.27
2 Bi-Lo, Parabanks SC, Salisbury	$69.51
3 Franklins, Unley	$73.43
4 Coles, Unley SC, Unley	$74.10
5 Coles, Old Port Canal SC, Port Adelaide	$74.22
6 Coles, Hollywood Plaza, Salisbury Downs	$74.32
7 Woolworths, Unley	$74.44
8 Woolworths, Parabanks SC, Salisbury	$74.86

BALLARAT

1 Safeway, Sebastopol	$75.91
2 Coles, Ballarat	$76.56
3 Jewel Warehouse, Creswick Plaza, Ballarat	$77.66

BENDIGO

1 Franklins, Lansell Plaza, Kangaroo Flat	$64.29
2 Safeway, Market Place, Bendigo	$75.58
3 Coles, Bendigo	$76.63
4 Jewel, Bendigo	$78.04

BRISBANE

1 Franklins, Westway SC, Ipswich	$67.44
2 Franklins, Mt Gravatt	$68.20
3 Bi-Lo, Rode SC, Stafford	$70.95
4 Franklins, Capalaba Park SC, Capalaba	$72.08
5 Coles, Ipswich	$72.64
6 Coles, Capalaba Park SC, Capalaba	$76.26
7 Woolworths, Ipswich City Square, Ipswich	$77.13
8 Coles, Sunnybank Plaza SC, Sunnybank	$77.29
9 Woolworths, Capalaba Central SC, Capalaba	$77.39
10 Woolworths, Garden City SC, Upper Mt Gravatt	$77.48
10 Woolworths, Stafford City SC, Stafford	$77.48
12 Coles, Garden City SC, Upper Mt Gravatt	$77.73

BUNBURY*

1 Coles, Bunbury	$78.54

CAIRNS

1 Woolworths, Earlville Shoppingtown, Earlville	$76.88
2 Coles, Westcourt Plaza, Westcourt	$78.06

CANBERRA

1 Franklins, Westfield Shoppingtown, Belconnen	$75.54
2 Woolworths, Phillip	$76.56
3 Franklins, Woden Plaza, Phillip	$76.66
4 Coles, Tuggeranong Town Centre, Tuggeranong	$76.91
4 Coles, Westfield Shoppingtown, Belconnen	$76.91
6 Woolworths, Westfield Shoppingtown, Belconnen	$77.27
7 Woolworths, Tuggeranong Town Centre, T'nong	$77.31

CENTRAL COAST

1 Coles, West Gosford SC, West Gosford	$71.40
2 Franklins, Erina Fair, Erina	$73.51
3 Woolworths, Erina Fair, Erina	$74.60
4 Jewel Food Barn, Erina	$77.12

DARWIN

1 Bi-Lo, Casuarina Village, Casuarina	$78.38
2 Coles, Casuarina Shopping Square, Casuarina	$80.97
3 Rite Price, Nightcliff	$81.49
4 Woolworths, Casuarina Shopping Square, Casuarina	$81.87

GEELONG

1 Franklins, Waurnvale SC, Waurn Ponds	$71.51
2 Safeway, Waurnvale SC, Waurn Ponds	$75.85
3 Safeway, Market Square SC, Geelong	$75.88
4 Coles, Bay City Plaza SC, Geelong	$76.39
5 Jewel Food Barn, Geelong	$77.20
6 Foodtown, Geelong East	$87.60

GOLD COAST

1 Franklins, Australia Fair SC, Southport	$68.84
2 Coles, Australia Fair SC, Southport	$77.13
3 Coles, Tweed Mall SC, Tweed Heads	$77.45
3 Woolworths, Tweed Mall SC, Tweed Heads	$77.45
5 Woolworths, Southport Park SC, Southport	$77.56

HOBART

1 Coles, Sandy Bay	$85.53
2 Coles, Eastlands SC, Rosny	$85.56
3 Coles, Northgate SC, Glenorchy	$86.52
4 Purity, Eastlands SC, Rosny	$86.87
5 Purity, Sandy Bay	$86.91
6 Purity, Glenorchy	$87.51

LAUNCESTON

1 Coles, Mowbray	$85.09
2 Festival, Prospect	$86.59
3 Roelf Vos, Newnham	$86.68

MELBOURNE

1 Franklins, Northland SC, Preston	$69.66
2 Franklins, Werribee Plaza SC, Hoppers Crossing	$73.34
3 Coles, Cranbourne Park SC, Cranbourne	$75.42
4 Safeway, Cranbourne	$75.56
4 Safeway, Croydon	$75.56
4 Safeway, Ferntree Gully	$75.56
4 Safeway, Werribee	$75.56
8 Coles, Northland SC, Preston	$75.95
9 Safeway, Preston	$75.98
10 Coles, Mountain Gate SC, Ferntree Gully	$76.35
11 Bi-Lo, Croydon	$76.39
12 Coles, Werribee Plaza SC, Hoppers Crossing	$76.52
13 Coles, Croydon Market SC, Croydon	$76.54
14 Jewel Warehouse Store, Werribee	$77.64
15 Jewel Food Barn, Ferntree Gully	$77.97
16 Jewel Country Fresh, Croydon	$78.08

NEWCASTLE

1 Franklins, Stockland Mall, Jesmond	$65.37
2 Coles, Wallsend Plaza, Wallsend	$68.35
3 Coles, Garden City SC, Kotara	$71.56
4 Woolworths, Stockland Mall, Jesmond	$73.12
5 Woolworths, Garden City SC, Kotara	$73.37
6 Jewel Food Barn, Wallsend Plaza, Wallsend	$75.73

ORANGE

1 Coles, Orange Metro, Orange	$75.88
2 Franklins, Summer Centre, Orange	$77.49
3 Woolworths, Orange	$77.75

PERTH

1 Coles, Subiaco	$76.20
2 Woolworths, Warwick Grove SC, Warwick	$78.32
3 Coles, Warwick Grove SC, Warwick	$78.91
4 Woolworths, Maddington Metro SC, Maddington	$79.72
5 Woolworths, Centre Point SC, Midland	$79.95
6 Action Food Barn, Maddington Village SC, M'dngtn	$79.99
7 Coles, Midland Gate SC, Midland	$80.06
8 Coles, Maddington Metro SC, Maddington	$80.20
9 Woolworths, Crossways SC, Subiaco	$80.27
10 Action Store, Midland	$80.75
11 Farmer Jack's, Midland	$83.73

ROCKINGHAM

1 Coles, Rockingham City SC, Rockingham	$80.00
2 Woolworths, Rockingham	$80.16
3 Supa Valu, Rockingham	$84.77

SYDNEY

1 Franklins, Castle Towers SC, Castle Hill	$66.24
2 Franklins, Miranda Fair SC, Miranda	$68.51
3 Franklins, Macarthur Square, Campbelltown	$73.29
4 Franklins, Marketown, Mt Druitt	$73.63
5 Coles, Campbelltown Mall SC, Campbelltown	$73.65
6 Woolworths, Marketown, Mt Druitt	$74.59
7 Woolworths, Marrickville	$74.75
8 Coles, Mt Druitt SC, Mt Druitt	$74.91
9 Coles, Castle Towers SC, Castle Hill	$75.56
10 Franklins, Marrickville Metro SC, Marrickville	$75.57
11 Woolworths, Macarthur Square, Campbelltown	$75.86
12 Super J Warehouse Store, Mt Druitt	$75.95
13 Coles, Parkside Plaza SC, Miranda	$76.01
14 Jewel Warehouse Store, Campbelltown Market Place, Campbelltown	$76.32
15 Coles, Big Bear SC, Neutral Bay	$76.51
16 Franklins, Neutral Bay	$77.83
17 Woolworths, Neutral Bay	$77.97
18 Woolworths, Miranda Fair SC, Miranda	$78.06
19 Jewel Food Barn, Marrickville Metro SC, M'ville	$78.69

TAMWORTH

1 Coles, Tamworth	$77.96
2 Woolworths, Tamworth	$78.05
3 Bi-Lo, Tamworth	$78.26

TOOWOOMBA

1 Coles, K-Mart Plaza, Toowoomba	$73.03
2 Woolworths, Clifford Gardens, Toowoomba	$77.39

WAGGA WAGGA

1 Coles, Sturt Mall SC, Wagga Wagga	$75.89
2 Woolworths, Wagga Market Place, Wagga Wagga	$78.02
3 Jewel Food Barn, Wagga Wagga	$78.04

WHYALLA

1 Bi-Lo, Westland SC, Whyalla Norrie	$71.00
2 Woolworths, Westland SC, Whyalla Norrie	$74.92
3 Foodland, Whyalla Stuart	$85.55

WOLLONGONG

1 Franklins, Crown Central SC, Wollongong	$69.44
2 Coles, Shellharbour Square, Barrack Heights	$73.16
3 Franklins, Shellharbour Square, Barrack Heights	$73.51
4 Woolworths, Wollongong	$78.02
5 Jewel Food Barn, Wollongong	$78.27

SC Shopping centre

Franklins includes Big Fresh, Fresh and No Frills stores.

* See *How special?* on page 11 for why there's only one store listed in Bunbury, WA.

Cheapest available basket

ADELAIDE

1 Woolworths, Unley	$47.23
2 Franklins, Unley	$47.59
3 Woolworths, Parabanks SC, Salisbury	$48.17
4 Coles, Hollywood Plaza, Salisbury Downs	$48.44
5 Bi-Lo, Parabanks SC, Salisbury	$48.56
6 Coles, Old Port Canal SC, Port Adelaide	$51.52
7 Bi-Lo, Port Adelaide	$51.61
8 Coles, Unley SC, Unley	$51.92

BALLARAT

1 Jewel Warehouse, Creswick Plaza, Ballarat	$49.48
2 Coles, Ballarat	$49.98
3 Safeway, Sebastopol	$50.55

BENDIGO

1 Franklins, Lansell Plaza, Kangaroo Flat	$46.76
2 Coles, Bendigo	$50.22
3 Jewel, Bendigo	$52.88
4 Safeway, Market Place, Bendigo	$53.69

BRISBANE

1 Franklins, Westway SC, Ipswich	$43.43
2 Franklins, Capalaba Park SC, Capalaba	$43.66
3 Coles, Ipswich	$47.70
4 Franklins, Mt Gravatt	$49.00
5 Coles, Capalaba Park SC, Capalaba	$50.04
6 Woolworths, Ipswich City Square, Ipswich	$51.05
7 Woolworths, Capalaba Central SC, Capalaba	$51.84
8 Bi-Lo, Rode SC, Stafford	$52.55
9 Woolworths, Stafford City SC, Stafford	$53.45
10 Woolworths, Garden City SC, Upper Mt Gravatt	$55.80
11 Coles, Sunnybank Plaza SC, Sunnybank	$56.07
12 Coles, Garden City SC, Upper Mt Gravatt	$56.25

BUNBURY*

1 Coles, Bunbury	$58.82

CAIRNS

1 Coles, Westcourt Plaza, Westcourt	$51.55
2 Woolworths, Earlville Shoppingtown, Earlville	$53.95

CANBERRA

1 Franklins, Westfield Shoppingtown, Belconnen	$45.90
2 Woolworths, Westfield Shoppingtown, Belconnen	$48.66
3 Franklins, Woden Plaza, Phillip	$49.94
4 Coles, Westfield Shoppingtown, Belconnen	$50.59
5 Woolworths, Tuggeranong Town Centre, T'nong	$51.06
6 Woolworths, Phillip	$54.83
7 Coles, Tuggeranong Town Centre, Tuggeranong	$55.85

CENTRAL COAST

1 Franklins, Erina Fair, Erina	$46.59
2 Coles, West Gosford SC, West Gosford	$47.54
3 Woolworths, Erina Fair, Erina	$48.93
4 Jewel Food Barn, Erina	$51.57

DARWIN

1 Bi-Lo, Casuarina Village, Casuarina	$56.83
2 Woolworths, Casuarina Shopping Square, Casuarina	$59.54
3 Rite Price, Nightcliff	$60.00
4 Coles, Casuarina Shopping Square, Casuarina	$61.85

GEELONG

1 Franklins, Waurnvale SC, Waurn Ponds	$48.10
2 Coles, Bay City Plaza SC, Geelong	$57.21
3 Safeway, Market Square SC, Geelong	$54.26
4 Safeway, Waurnvale SC, Waurn Ponds	$55.32
5 Jewel Food Barn, Geelong	$59.12
6 Foodtown, Geelong East	$71.67

GOLD COAST

1 Franklins, Australia Fair SC, Southport	$45.30
2 Woolworths, Tweed Mall SC, Tweed Heads	$49.56
3 Coles, Tweed Mall SC, Tweed Heads	$50.91
4 Woolworths, Southport Park SC, Southport	$53.19
5 Coles, Australia Fair SC, Southport	$54.51

HOBART

1 Coles, Sandy Bay	$61.47
2 Coles, Eastlands SC, Rosny	$62.85
3 Coles, Northgate SC, Glenorchy	$63.10
4 Purity, Eastlands SC, Rosny	$64.65
5 Purity, Sandy Bay	$65.85
6 Purity, Glenorchy	$66.46

LAUNCESTON

1 Roelf Vos, Newnham	$59.59
2 Coles, Mowbray	$62.88
3 Festival, Prospect	$66.55

MELBOURNE

1 Coles, Cranbourne Park SC, Cranbourne	$49.19
2 Coles, Croydon Market SC, Croydon	$50.49
3 Coles, Mountain Gate SC, Ferntree Gully	$50.54
4 Coles, Werribee Plaza SC, Hoppers Crossing	$50.71
5 Jewel Warehouse Store, Werribee	$50.88
6 Safeway, Cranbourne	$50.96
7 Franklins, Northland SC, Preston	$50.98
8 Franklins, Werribee Plaza SC, Hoppers Crossing	$51.86
9 Bi-Lo, Croydon	$52.82
10 Safeway, Ferntree Gully	$53.01
11 Safeway, Croydon	$53.08
12 Jewel Food Barn, Ferntree Gully	$53.71
13 Safeway, Werribee	$53.75
14 Coles, Northland SC, Preston	$55.58
15 Jewel Country Fresh, Croydon	$56.34
16 Safeway, Preston	$57.87

NEWCASTLE

1 Franklins, Stockland Mall, Jesmond	$42.22
2 Coles, Wallsend Plaza, Wallsend	$48.41
3 Woolworths, Stockland Mall, Jesmond	$48.42
4 Jewel Food Barn, Wallsend Plaza, Wallsend	$48.84
5 Woolworths, Garden City SC, Kotara	$48.94
6 Coles, Garden City SC, Kotara	$51.42

ORANGE

1 Franklins, Summer Centre, Orange	$48.35
2 Woolworths, Orange	$49.62
3 Coles, Orange Metro, Orange	$54.83

PERTH

1 Coles, Warwick Grove SC, Warwick	$55.71
2 Coles, Subiaco	$56.15
3 Action Store, Midland	$56.94
4 Woolworths, Centre Point SC, Midland	$57.22
5 Woolworths, Warwick Grove SC, Warwick	$57.34
6 Action Food Barn, Maddington Village SC, M'dngtn	$57.86
7 Woolworths, Crossways SC, Subiaco	$57.98
8 Coles, Maddington Metro SC, Maddington	$58.67
9 Woolworths, Maddington Metro SC, Maddington	$59.43
10 Farmer Jack's, Midland	$60.21
11 Coles, Midland Gate SC, Midland	$60.27

ROCKINGHAM

1 Woolworths, Rockingham	$61.10
2 Coles, Rockingham City SC, Rockingham	$62.36
3 Supa Valu, Rockingham	$63.36

SYDNEY

1 Franklins, Macarthur Square, Campbelltown	$42.44
2 Franklins, Marrickville Metro SC, Marrickville	$42.97
3 Franklins, Miranda Fair SC, Miranda	$43.37
4 Franklins, Castle Towers SC, Castle Hill	$43.77
5 Franklins, Marketown, Mt Druitt	$46.82
6 Woolworths, Marrickville	$47.12
7 Franklins, Neutral Bay	$47.84
8 Woolworths, Macarthur Square, Campbelltown	$48.09
9 Coles, Campbelltown Mall SC, Campbelltown	$48.30
10 Woolworths, Miranda Fair SC, Miranda	$48.88
11 Woolworths, Neutral Bay	$49.29
12 Coles, Parkside Plaza SC, Miranda	$50.58
13 Jewel Warehouse Store, Campbelltown Market Place, Campbelltown	$50.70
14 Jewel Food Barn, Marrickville Metro SC, M'ville	$51.92
15 Woolworths, Marketown, Mt Druitt	$52.58
16 Coles, Big Bear SC, Neutral Bay	$52.78
17 Coles, Mt Druitt SC, Mt Druitt	$53.11
18 Coles, Castle Towers SC, Castle Hill	$53.34
19 Super J Warehouse Store, Mt Druitt	$53.56

TAMWORTH

1 Bi-Lo, Tamworth	$52.19
2 Woolworths, Tamworth	$56.74
3 Coles, Tamworth	$59.94

TOOWOOMBA

1 Coles, K-Mart Plaza, Toowoomba	$49.01
2 Woolworths, Clifford Gardens, Toowoomba	$50.56

WAGGA WAGGA

1 Coles, Sturt Mall SC, Wagga Wagga	$51.75
2 Jewel Food Barn, Wagga Wagga	$52.60
3 Woolworths, Wagga Market Place, Wagga Wagga	$54.93

WHYALLA

1 Woolworths, Westland SC, Whyalla Norrie	$50.42
2 Bi-Lo, Westland SC, Whyalla Norrie	$52.78
3 Foodland, Whyalla Stuart	$64.55

WOLLONGONG

1 Franklins, Crown Central SC, Wollongong	$46.36
2 Franklins, Shellharbour Square, Barrack Heights	$51.24
3 Jewel Food Barn, Wollongong	$51.78
4 Woolworths, Wollongong	$53.92
5 Coles, Shellharbour Square, Barrack Heights	$55.42

SC Shopping centre

Franklins includes Big Fresh, Fresh and No Frills stores.

* See *How special?* on page 11 for why there's only one store listed in Bunbury, WA.

Laser eye surgery

For some people it has the potential to deliver 20/20 vision. But there are risks, side effects and uncertainties — so proceed carefully if you're considering laser eye surgery.

IN BRIEF

- You need to be clear about the likely outcome as well as the risks; if you're expecting perfect eyesight, you might be disappointed.
- Make a point to ask about aftercare. Specifically, who pays if additional operations are required?

SOME RAVE ABOUT IT, OTHERS REGRET it. While laser eye surgery can deliver clear vision for certain people, there are risks and possible side effects; and it hasn't been around long enough for anyone to know what its long-term effects might be. It's also a substantial investment — and you could be left with worse eyesight than you had before.

If you're considering laser eye surgery, maintain a healthy scepticism. Don't be reeled in by advertisements dripping with optimistic promises (see *High hopes*, opposite).

Surgery options

There are two types of laser eye surgery, both of which involve using an 'excimer' laser to reshape the cornea (the clear, front surface of the eye that does most of the focusing). They usually cost about $2000 to $2500 per eye — and neither procedure is covered by Medicare or private insurance.

- **PRK** (photorefractive keratotomy) is the older procedure, and was introduced in Australia in 1991. PRK begins with a portion of the outer layer of the cornea, the epithelium, being scraped away. An excimer laser is then applied to the exposed surface, which is sculpted to correct the eye's refractive error.
- **LASIK** (laser-assisted in-situ keratomileusis) is quite different. To begin with, the outer layer of the cornea is cut to leave a flap that is peeled back but not removed. The flap is about the thickness of three human hairs. After it is rolled back the laser is applied to the area within the cornea (whereas PRK works on the corneal surface). When the laser treatment is finished, the flap is placed back over the treated area and adheres naturally.

LASIK is less painful than PRK and allows for faster visual recovery. It's also more effective at treating worse cases of short-sightedness, but it's a more complicated procedure and, as such, carries more risk. Both PRK and LASIK can also be used to treat mild cases of long-sightedness.

Side effects and complications

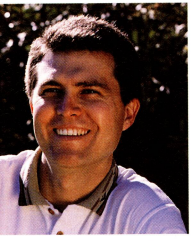
Your ophthalmologist should explain the possible side effects and complications associated with laser eye surgery. Some problems — like light sensitivity, halos, glaring and blurring — usually disappear over time, but there are far more serious potential complications that may not. Ophthalmologists also warn that the long-term effects of laser eye surgery remain unknown.

According to Dr. Michael Lawless from the Sydney Refractive Surgery Centre, there's a one-in-20,000 chance of a "devastating complication" and about a one-in-200 chance that the procedure might cause a reduction in "best corrected vision". This means that your eyesight — after it stabilises following surgery — ends up worse than before the procedure.

It's impossible to tell in advance exactly how successful the operation will be. Terry Couper, from the Melbourne Excimer Laser Centre, explains that the certainty of achieving 20/20 vision decreases with the severity of vision impairment. Generally speaking, he says, the chances of an unsuccessful outcome increase with the strength of your prescription.

An unsuccessful outcome could mean you'll need retreatment, and not all surgeries include the cost of further operations in their original price. Make sure you ask about everything that is (and isn't) included in the aftercare policy.

A CLEAR SUCCESS



Peter Moritz found his glasses to be unbearably inconvenient when he was playing sports. He tried contacts, but found them impractical, so he decided to explore other options. "I just wanted to get rid of my glasses," he said.

He ended up at a centre for laser eye surgery. Both procedures — LASIK and PRK — were explained to him. "They really emphasised all the possible complications and side effects — I appreciated that," he told us.

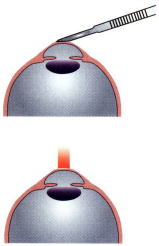
Although his short-sightedness was mild enough for PRK to be an option, Peter elected to proceed with LASIK surgery.

The procedure took about an hour for each eye, but only 15 minutes for the actual surgery. He experienced no pain and only a little discomfort during surgery.

And the side effects? Peter did have some problems with his night vision for several months after the operation, and car and traffic lights caused some blurring of his vision. "However, this completely cleared after about four months and I would consider my eyesight as better, day and night, than it was when I wore glasses."

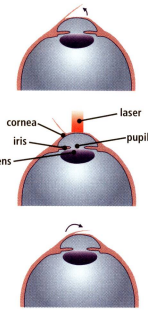
PRK

A portion of the outer layer of the cornea is scraped away and an excimer laser then sculpts the eye's surface to correct the refractive error.



LASIK

A flap is cut in the outer layer of the cornea, the laser is applied to the area inside the cornea, and then the flap is placed back over the treated area.



Great expectations

No laser surgery procedure can guarantee improved eyesight — and you definitely should not expect to walk into a doctor's office and come out an hour later with 20/20 vision. It's not that simple.

- If you're having both eyes corrected they shouldn't be done at the same time. Most ophthalmologists prefer to operate on one eye, then wait at least a day before doing the other.
- There's a chance your vision might not improve enough to make glasses or contacts unnecessary. Even if your eyesight is dramatically improved, it probably won't mean the end of glasses for you. Laser surgery won't stop the aging process, which means at some point you'll probably need reading glasses like most people.

It comes down to a very personal choice. Are you prepared to accept the cost, risks, side effects and uncertainties for the chance of gaining better eyesight? ❑

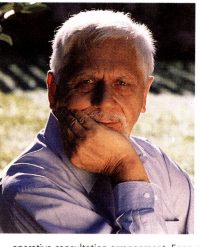
High hopes

There have been complaints within the ophthalmology community about the manner in which laser eye surgery is being promoted. Critics have focused on advertisements which suggest that people will never have to wear glasses or contact lenses again.

Given all the risks and side effects associated with laser eye surgery, such claims clearly aren't telling the whole story. Dr. Ivan Goldberg, a Sydney ophthalmologist, is concerned that the proper cautionary notice is being overshadowed by the positive and pervasive nature of such advertisements.

"The advertising overwhelms informed consent and creates a climate of unrealistic expectations," he said. "These procedures are good, effective and safe, but there are risks involved."

FROM BAD TO WORSE



Egon's experience fell devastatingly short of his expectations. He has worn glasses since the age of seven. Now 64, he's too short-sighted to read his alarm clock in the morning. When he saw a newspaper advertisement for laser eye surgery Egon decided to give it a shot.

He went for a consultation and was informed he'd be suitable for LASIK treatment, which he was told would deliver close to 20/20 vision at a cost of $2500 per eye. He was also warned about possible risks and told there was about a 3% chance of an unsuccessful procedure. "But I thought, 'Surely I'm not one of those 3%'," said Egon.

His left eye was done first, followed by his right eye a week later. Soon after, he developed a halo effect in his vision — "lights appeared fuzzy and twice as big". His ophthalmologist reassured him that this side effect would disappear in a month or so.

Shortly thereafter he developed a ghosting effect in both eyes. He'd sometimes see three images in his right eye and two images in his left. The overall result was that his distance vision was blurred.

His doctor recommended he undergo surgery again. As part of the 12-month post-operative consultation arrangement, Egon wasn't charged for this corrective procedure.

After the second operation on his left eye it became even more short-sighted than before. Egon opted out of having another operation on his right eye, which remains blurred by ghosting images.

Before the operations — costing $5000 — Egon could see clearly when he wore his glasses. Now he has two flawed eyes, each with different problems, and is hoping to find a prescription to fix his vision. Recently prescribed corrective lenses failed to improve his vision at all.

TIP:

When an optometrist refers you to an ophthalmologist for laser eye surgery, you may want to ask if the optometrist has a financial stake in the excimer laser centre, or receives a 'co-management' fee for the referral. The advice could be less objective and trustworthy than you'd think. Make certain you're being referred for the right reasons.

Computer chaos

Hundreds of people have been caught out in recent computer store closures. If you're one of them, what are your options?

THE CLONE COMPUTER INDUSTRY IS in a spot of turmoil at the moment: Fairstar Computers, Empire Systems and South Pacific computers went into liquidation recently, leaving customers owed hundreds of thousands of dollars in deposits or advance payments for computer systems, and pre-payment for software and hardware.

Other consumer problems have included the delivery of incorrect and faulty parts, systems with missing parts and lengthy delays in warranty repairs.

The NSW Department of Fair Trading had received hundreds of complaints about at least one of the companies, and issued a warning about Empire — but unfortunately only after the doors were closed.

The department has also issued a warning to consumers not to do business with the Newcastle dealer, Freeway Computer Company.

What can I do?

- If you need a repair and the company's folded, check the warranty that came with your computer hardware or software. If it's underwritten by a larger company, take your claim up with it.
- List yourself as a creditor with the company's administrator. While it's unlikely there'll be any money left after major suppliers have taken their share, there's a chance the company will successfully trade out of its difficulties. You can find the administrator by asking the company, or you can pay the Australian Securities and Investment Commission (ASIC) Business Centre $10 to perform a search.
- Send your local office of fair trading/consumer affairs a letter detailing the issue for future reference.
- If your computer was in for repairs and mistakenly seized as an asset of the company, you are entitled to its return. Contact the administrator with proof of ownership.

Take precautions

- If you're worried, you can do a company search, either through an ASIC Business Centre, or through its Web site (http://www.asic.gov.au). You can also call the ASIC Infoline on 1300 300 630 to find out whether there are any proceedings against a company.
- You can call your state department of fair trading/consumer affairs for advice and information.
- Don't pay large deposits in advance for made-to-order computers.
- If the computer company is small, look through the warranty for a clause that states the computer is underwritten by a larger company before you buy.
- Ask to see the computer you're purchasing up and running while it's still in the shop. Ask very specifically if this is the exact computer you'll be receiving, and make a note of the serial number.
- Always get and keep receipts; mark on each receipt when the goods arrived, and mark the goods clearly as yours, to identify them should they accidentally be seized as company assets. ❑

CASE OF THE DISAPPEARING COMPUTER

When Kennie Dubois of Mudgeeraba, Queensland, took her computer to have a new CD-ROM drive installed, the computer company, Memdex, told her it would be ready for her to pick up the next day. However, when she came back, the shop had closed and all the store's equipment was being packed into a van. To her surprise, her PC was one of the machines seized as company assets.

Kennie had receipts showing she owned the computer and that she'd dropped it off and paid $145 to have a new drive put in. When she asked the administrator for her computer back, he said he couldn't find it. Both the administrator and the ASIC suggested that a theft might have occurred in the uproar. Four months later, she still hasn't seen her computer or a cash reimbursement.

CHOICE contacted the Queensland Office of Consumer Affairs, which suggested the police should investigate the matter. Kennie also may have a case under the Fair Trading Act if it can be proved that Memdex staff knew the company wouldn't be able to supply the service to her when it took her money. CHOICE is currently discussing the question of theft with the Queensland Police Department, but they appear reluctant to get involved in such a complicated case.

TEST REPORT

Dishwasher update

No, this is not a filing cabinet — it's Fisher & Paykel's new release: a dishwasher with two drawers so you can wash small loads in one drawer or use both for larger loads. We tested it to see how it compares to standard models we reported on last year.

A DISHWASHER COMES IN HANDY after a dinner party, but if your household is small, you may find it too big to fill up every day and run economically.

Fisher & Paykel has addressed this common problem with the introduction of its new **F & P DishDrawer DD601**. Rather than having just a single compartment for a large load of dishes, this dishwasher has two drawers which can be operated independently.

So you can wash a smaller load economically — and without guilt — in just one drawer, and continue to place dirty dishes in the second drawer. Or you can use the other drawer as temporary storage space for clean dishes.

For large loads you'd use both drawers at the same time but, as the two drawers work independently, you can choose different washing programs for each drawer. So you can have glasses washed in one drawer on the delicate cycle and everything else in the other on a normal or heavy-duty cycle.

Performance

To see how this novel dishwasher compares for performance with standard models, we put it through the same tests as the dishwashers we reported on last year (CHOICE, July 1997).

While the **F & P DishDrawer DD601**'s washing score wasn't as high as the top scores in our 1997 test, its overall score was 77%, which would place it equal sixth (with the **BLANCO BDW 203** and the **CHEF Classic**) out of 16.

Ease of use

For ease of use, however, it rated second highest. Having two drawers that can be operated independently makes it much more versatile and convenient than single-compartment dishwashers.

Some of the racks inside are interchangeable between the drawers, so you can optimise the space available and adapt it to your needs. The drawers open fully for easy loading and the filter can be removed, cleaned and replaced very easily.

The **F & P DishDrawer DD601** takes 14 standard place settings. Tall glasses and non-standard items fit in comfortably, but if you have extra-large dinner plates, take one with you to the shop and try it out. The cutlery baskets are divided into smaller compartments, some of which have anti-nesting grids.

A normal wash cycle on the **F & P DishDrawer DD601** takes 89 minutes, a fast cycle 39 minutes. The machine can only be connected to one tap and heats its own water. It has a delay-start feature, which can be set to start from one to 12 hours later.

Another advantage of the **F & P DishDrawer DD601** is its lower environmental impact. For the economy-cycle test we washed a load in one drawer only, which resulted in very low energy and water consumption. Even with both drawers filled to capacity, it still only uses about 18 litres of water for the normal wash cycle, which compares very well with the other models we tested.

The downside of this innovative new release is its price. At $1665 recommended retail for the white model, it's more expensive than the top-scoring **AEG Öko Favorit 6050** (around $1500) and most of the other models in last year's test. However, we were quoted $1465 by one appliance retailer, so shop around if you're interested. The same shop quoted $1517 for an integrated model (which can be fitted with decor panels to match kitchen surfaces) and $1568 for a stainless steel one.

Smaller version

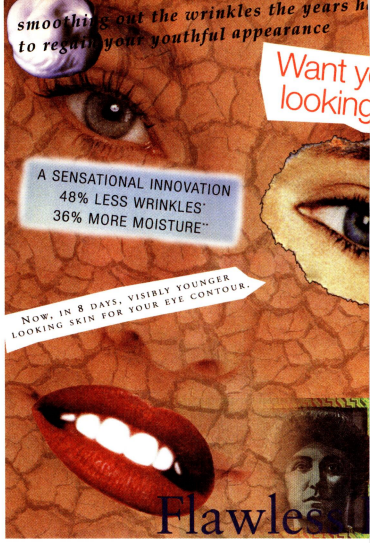
Fisher & Paykel has also released a single-drawer model, the **DishDrawer DS601**, which is the size of just one drawer and has to be built into a cupboard under the benchtop. Our best quotes were $820 (white), $865 (integrated) and $911 (stainless steel). According to the manufacturer, it's technically identical to the double-drawer model except for having only one drawer and extra soundproofing material on the top of the machine. ❑

IN BRIEF

A two-drawer machine is innovative and versatile — but expensive.

REPORT

Vanity, vain hopes and anti-aging treatments



They lure us in with their 'scientific' claims, elegant packaging and even their price tags — after all, if they're that expensive, surely they must work? But are you simply wasting your money on anti-aging creams?

IN BRIEF

- There are no 'miracle' anti-aging products available from your department store; expensive brand-name creams are unlikely to do any more than a moisturiser.
- Some products can help: tretinoin (Retin-A) has been clinically shown to reduce wrinkles, but has a number of undesirable side effects and is available only on prescription; alpha-hydroxy acids (AHAs) can help your skin look smoother and pinker, but may not reduce wrinkles — see page 20.
- Laser resurfacing and some chemical peels are effective and increasingly popular treatments in cosmetic skin surgery — see page 22.
- Prevention is better than cure — the best anti-wrinkle treatment is wearing sunscreen and a hat.

ANTI-AGING IS BIG BUSINESS, WORTH billions of dollars worldwide, and appeals to our vanity and vulnerability by bamboozling us with pseudo-science and the promise of perfect skin. There are almost as many magic, 'breakthrough' ingredients as there are products, from ceramides and collagen to fish protein and caffeine.

The biggest buzzwords in today's world of anti-aging creams are the three 'A's: vitamin A, alpha-hydroxy acids (AHAs) and antioxidants. But will these creams do anything more for your skin than a simple moisturiser would?

The good news is that there is hope. The bad news is you won't find it at the cosmetics counter in your department store.

Skin and the aging process

Your skin is composed of the epidermis, the dermis and subcutaneous tissue. The inner layer of the epidermis is where new skin cells are made, while the outermost layer, called the stratum corneum, is made up of dead skin cells.

The dermis, which lies under the epidermis, consists of connective tissue: mostly collagen, which gives the skin its structure, and elastin, a protein that forms elastic fibres that give skin its resilience. Subcutaneous tissue supports blood vessels for nourishment and draining away waste products.

As skin ages, the epidermis and dermis become thinner and the dermis loses elasticity as the elastin fibres coarsen and collagen deteriorates. Blood flow decreases and skin cell renewal slows down.

But it's sun, rather than your age, that does most of the damage, and this is called photo-aging. The epidermis becomes irregular in thickness, and elastic fibres degrade and thicken. Visible signs include wrinkles, mottled pigmentations (including freckles and liver spots), and dry, rough and dull skin.

Does anything work against wrinkles?

Moisturisers act by plumping up the top layer of skin cells, the epidermis, which can make skin look smoother and wrinkles less noticeable. But for a cream or lotion to have any real anti-aging effect, it has to operate in the dermis as well. Tretinoin and

AHAs (in high enough concentrations) have been shown to act in both the epidermis and dermis, and currently lead the fight in the wrinkle war, while antioxidants are fast catching up.

■ Tretinoin

Tretinoin (sold in Australia as **Retin-A**) is a well-established ingredient of anti-aging creams that is related to vitamin A. However, it can cause problems and is only available on prescription.

■ Alpha-hydroxy acids (AHAs)

Clinical studies have found that in strong enough concentrations, AHAs can thicken the epidermis and stimulate the production of new collagen and elastin fibres in the dermis. They also slough off the outer layer of dead cells from the stratum corneum. Your skin may look better overall, but the effect on your wrinkles might only be visible under a microscope.

■ Antioxidants

The latest craze is antioxidants, particularly vitamins C and E. While there's no good evidence of their effectiveness as yet, and marketplace momentum is well ahead of scientific fact, experts agree that antioxidants show some promise.

See *Creams, lotions and magic potions*, page 20, for more on tretinoin, AHAs and antioxidants.

Just expensive moisturisers

Unfortunately, the typical department store 'anti-aging' product — including those with AHAs and antioxidants — is unlikely to do anything more than a regular moisturiser.

Our sister consumer organisations in Germany and the UK tested 19 popular anti-aging creams between them and found they were no better — and sometimes worse — than inexpensive moisturisers. Although many contain ingredients like AHAs and pure vitamin A (retinol), which can have an anti-aging effect, they're not present in high enough concentrations to be effective.

Prevention is the best medicine

Prevention, as the saying goes, is better than cure, and that certainly holds true for wrinkles. Premature development of fine lines and other evidence of aged skin (such as irregular pigmentation and roughness) can be prevented easily and cheaply — by using sunscreen and wearing a hat. Furthermore, there's some evidence that once skin is protected from further UV damage, it can start to repair itself.

But choose your sunscreen carefully. UVA rays are thought to cause disproportionately more of the characteristics of aging than UVB because they penetrate deeper into the skin. However, many anti-aging creams and moisturisers with a protection rating of up to SPF15+ contain only a UVB blocker (octyl methoxycinnamate), which won't fully protect your skin from the aging effects of the sun.

Although there are some partial-UVA blockers out there, like Parsol 1789 (butyl methoxydibenzoylmethane), experts recommend a broad-spectrum physical blocker, such as titanium dioxide or zinc oxide. They'll block UVA, UVB and infrared radiation. They're not often used in moisturisers because they can leave your skin looking pale and ghost-like. However, 'micronised' (or 'microfine') titanium dioxide, which can be found in products like **EGO Sun Sense, NIVEA Visage** and **OIL OF ULAN UV protectant** reduces that effect.

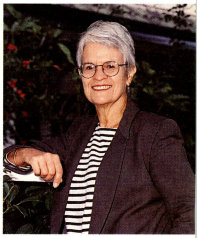
The bottom line on wrinkle-free skin?

Prematurely aged skin can be easily prevented by wearing sunscreen every day. And don't forget your hat!

But if you want to get rid of existing wrinkles, don't waste your money on expensive 'anti-wrinkle' cosmetics — they're not much more than moisturisers.

If you're seriously determined to rid your face of wrinkles, you'll need the help of your doctor or dermatologist to get prescription-only products like tretinoin, or some form of skin surgery or a face lift (see *Facelifts*, page 22, for more on this).

SOFTER, BUT NO MIRACLES



Gillian Appleton started using glycolic acid products from a pharmacy about a year ago (glycolic acid is an AHA). She'd just had two liver spots partially removed from her face, and her doctor recommended using glycolic acid to treat the last traces of discolouration. He said it would also slough off old skin cells and leave her skin softer.

She can attest to the first claim — the liver spots have completely disappeared, as have some freckles. Her skin is also less dry. "My skin has always been very dry, and I used to have to put tons of moisturiser on at night. Now it seems a lot less so after using these products."

But has it made her skin look younger? "It's difficult to judge. I can't say definitely that it has eliminated or minimised fine lines, although I think that I have less noticeable lines around my eyes. On the whole I think it's good."

Note: Prices are what we paid and may vary from store to store.

Creams, lotions and magic potions

Vitamin A and derivatives

Treinoin (sold as Retin-A) is effective as an anti-aging treatment, but use it with care under medical supervision.

Tretinoin

Brand: Sold in Australia as **Retin-A** ($33.85 for 20 g— available only by prescription).

The facts: Tretinoin (also called retinoic acid) was originally used for treating acne, and is now a proven anti-aging treatment.

Clinical studies show that it increases new skin cell production, stimulates the production of collagen in the skin's dermis, and increases the formation of new blood vessels. After about six months of use, skin becomes smoother and less dull, and fine lines become shallower.

Tretinoin is classed as a drug, which is why it's only available on prescription. It can be an irritant, causing dry, red skin; has been implicated in birth defects (so don't use it during pregnancy); and can increase the skin's sensitivity to sun. If you're going to use it, you must be absolutely religious about applying sunscreen every day as well. Unless you're willing to make this commitment, experts recommend against using tretinoin for getting rid of wrinkles.

Retinol and vitamin A compounds

Brands include: AVON Anew Retinol Recovery Complex ($34.95 for 30 g); **SOTHYS Retinol-15** and **Retinol-30** ($85 for 30 g); **ELIZABETH ARDEN Advanced Time Complex Capsules** ($95 for 60); **LANCÔME Primordiale Nuit** ($105 for 50 mL).

The claims: In high enough concentrations, retinol (pure vitamin A), and retinyl palmitate (also called pro-retinol A or pro-vitamin A) can have the same effect as tretinoin.

The facts: Cosmetic creams, such as the **AVON** and **SOTHYS** products, contain pure retinol, while other creams contain retinyl palmitate. But experts say the concentration in these products is too low to have an effect. If the concentration was high enough to have an effect like tretinoin, it would be classed as a medicine rather than a cosmetic, and would be available only by prescription.

Alpha-hydroxy acids (AHAs)

Brands include: NEOSTRATA range (around $30–$35), **AQUA GLYCOLIC** range (around $30–$35), **MD FORMULATIONS Facial cream** ($79 for 50 g). Many products combine AHAs with other 'anti-aging' ingredients, like antioxidants (such as **BLACKMORES Antioxidant Skin Care Complex** ($32 for 100 g) and **CHRISTIAN DIOR Capture Rides Multi-action wrinkle cream** ($125 for 48 g).

The claims: AHAs are naturally occurring acids found in sugar cane (glycolic acid), sour milk (lactic acid) and fruit (such as citric acid). They exfoliate the stratum corneum (the external layer of the epidermis) and increase skin cell turnover. At high enough concentrations, they can also act in the dermis, where there's evidence they increase the production of collagen, elastin and glycosaminoglycans (moisture-attracting molecules). The dermis becomes thicker, the skin feels tighter and smoother, and lines are reduced in depth. Unlike tretinoin, they don't increase the skin's sensitivity to the sun.

The facts: The key to their effectiveness lies in both their concentration and their acidity. Experts agree that concentrations of less than 5% — as in a typical department store product — have very little effect. Stronger concentrations of AHAs (20–70%) are used for skin peels — see *Chemical peels*, page 22, for more on this.

Some over-the-counter products such as **NEOSTRATA**, **AQUA GLYCOLIC** and **MD FORMULATIONS** range from 8% to 15% AHA. Scientific studies have shown that using AHAs at these concentrations can make changes in the dermis. But these products are buffered: that is, they are partially neutralised, making them less acidic. This means they're less irritating, but also less effective, and although they may have the same effect as unbuffered products in the long term, it will take longer.

In the meantime, they do have a moisturising effect; you may find you get a pinker, smoother and fresher-looking face; and they can help with pigmentation irregularities — see *Softer, but no miracles*, page 19.

Always use the products according to directions — it's worth talking to your doctor before trying the stronger products.

Check the concentration of AHAs in a product: less than 5% will provide very little effect.

Beta Alistine and the CSIRO

You may have seen Beta Alistine skin care products on sale, or seen magazine ads, and noticed they've been linked with the CSIRO. Some readers wrote to tell us they'd tried skin care products containing Beta Alistine, and were disappointed with the results.

The CSIRO did some preliminary research on Beta Alistine that showed it had certain anti-aging properties. However, this research was based on skin-cell cultures, not people.

The CSIRO points out that it hasn't been involved with the production or testing of the skin-care range, despite references to the organisation on the products' packaging.

Collagen and elastin — the wonder ingredients of a few years ago, but there's no scientific evidence to show they're any more effective than a moisturiser.

Beta-hydroxy acids (BHAs)

Brands include: **CLINIQUE Turnaround Cream** ($35 for 30 mL).

The claims: BHAs, such as salicylic acid, are thought to work in a similar way to AHAs. It's claimed that they're effective in lower concentrations, and may be less irritating than AHAs.

The facts: BHAs haven't been widely studied as yet, and there's no conclusive evidence to support the claims.

There's no solid evidence that antioxidants work as an anti-aging treatment yet: market momentum is ahead of the science at present.

Antioxidants

Brands include: **AVON Anew Formula C** ($34.95 for 30 capsules); **BLACKMORES Antioxidant Skin Care** range (around $30 per product) and **High Potency Tablets** ($24 for one month); **JUVENA Rejuven Q10** ($49.95 for 50 mL); **LANCÔME Primordiale Soin Revitalisant Visible** ($98 for 50 mL).

The claims: Some research suggests that part of the UV damage to skin cells is caused by the production of free radicals, which are highly reactive forms of atoms or molecules. The theory goes that antioxidants — applied to the skin or taken in tablet form — can reduce the damaging effects of free radicals by 'mopping' them up, thereby preventing an aging effect on the skin.

The facts: Experts consider it's a good theory, but there's no good scientific evidence that antioxidants work currently. The main challenges at present are getting the antioxidants to penetrate the skin, then getting them to the right position in the dermis to do some good. But antioxidants could be the future of anti-aging treatment.

Collagen and elastin

Brands include: **JOHN PLUNKETT Super Wrinkle Cream** ($21.50 for 60 g); **L'ORÉAL Plenitude Revitalift** — elastin only ($19.65 for 50 mL).

The claims: Eight years ago, when we last wrote about anti-aging creams, collagen and 'cross-linked elastin' were all the rage. The reasoning was that they could replace the collagen and elastin that deteriorate and disappear as your skin ages.

The facts: There's been no scientific evidence that applying these substances to the outside of your skin will have any impact on levels of elastin and collagen in the skin's dermis. They're unlikely to be any better than a regular moisturiser.

Other ingredients

Ceramides, proteins, co-enzyme Q10

Brands include: **ELIZABETH ARDEN Ceramide** capsules ($95 for 60 capsules), **CHRISTIAN DIOR Capture Essentiel** ($125 for 50 mL), **GUERLAIN 12M Time response care** ($79 for 30 mL), **LANCÔME Rénergie** ($112 for 50 g), **LANCÔME Progres Intensif Rides** ($91 for 40 mL), **SHISEIDO Bio-Performance** ($120 for 50 mL), **L'ORÉAL Plenitude Advanced wrinkle defence cream** ($19.95 for 50 mL), **IMEDEEN Bio Marine Seafood Extract Tablets** (around $90 for 30 days' supply).

The facts: All sorts of magic ingredients pop up in anti-aging creams and pills, but experts say there's no hard evidence that the over-the-counter products are any better than moisturisers. Most of them are expensive and you're probably better off buying a sunscreen and cheaper moisturiser.

Oestrogen

Skin aging accelerates once women reach menopause, possibly due to a decrease in oestrogen levels. Preliminary studies have found that postmenopausal women taking oral oestrogen supplements have fewer wrinkles than those not taking it, while applying creams that contain oestrogen improved skin elasticity, firmness, moisture and blood flow, and lessened wrinkles. However, more studies are needed to substantiate these findings.

Why does it cost so much?

We took an anti-aging cream costing well over $100 and had its components (the cream and packaging) valued by cosmetics and packaging companies. The cream was valued at 39 to 50 cents, and the packaging at under $2.

Some of the $100+ goes to the retailer, and some to the government as sales tax and duty. But what about the rest of your money?

When we asked a couple of cosmetics companies to account for the high cost of their products, they weren't prepared to provide a breakdown of production costs (such as wages, administration, and research and development). Nor would they offer information on how much the costs of marketing and advertising contribute to the final price of the product.

The bottom line is that when you buy luxury-priced cosmetics, don't assume you're paying mainly for very exclusive, expensive ingredients.

Facelifts

Treatments like tretinoin and AHAs can make a small difference to your appearance. However, for a dramatic difference you'll probably have to go for some form of surgical or non-surgical 'facelift'. While collagen injections and chemical peels are still in vogue, laser resurfacing and 'botox' injections have risen in popularity over the last few years.

Laser resurfacing

Carbon dioxide lasers and erbium:YAG lasers can be used to 'burn' the top layer of skin from your face. The lasers vaporise water in the epidermis (which is 90% water) and also damage collagen in the dermis. As the skin heals, new collagen is produced, forming tighter bundles and resulting in tighter skin. The new epidermis is also free of sun damage. The effect is similar to a chemical peel (see below right), but lasers give more predictable results.

Possible side effects include scarring, redness, unnaturally pale skin, and bacterial or viral infections. Special care is needed after the operation to avoid these. Erbium:YAG lasers don't penetrate as deeply as carbon dioxide lasers, so the skin heals faster and there's less chance of side effects.

At present there's no government regulation of the laser therapy industry — in theory, anyone can go out and buy a machine. If you're considering these types of treatment, look for a plastic surgeon specialising in cosmetic surgery or a dermatologist with plenty of cosmetic laser experience.

How much does it cost? Around $1000 to $5500 for a full-face resurfacing.

How long does it take to heal? Carbon dioxide laser therapy takes about 10 to 14 days; erbium:YAG five to 10 days. Redness can last up to six months.

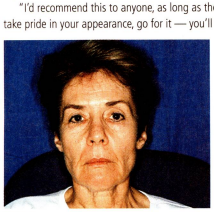
How long does it last? Up to 10 years.

NO REGRETS

Heather Spiric is 60, and just wanted to "look good for her age". She did a lot of research into the options and decided on laser surgery, with some liposuction under the eyes. She went to a dermatologist for the treatment, and is absolutely delighted with the results.

The treatment took place in a suburban laser clinic, and she was given a local anaesthetic and sedative. She had to wear dressings for a week afterwards to keep her skin moist, and says her skin was very red for about a month. But she hasn't once regretted her decision.

"I'd recommend this to anyone, as long as they make sure they're in good hands. If you take pride in your appearance, go for it — you'll never regret it."



Before...

...after

Excessive packaging

There's no doubt that the packaging of cosmetics plays a large part in a product's appeal — apparently all the more reason for manufacturers to go over the top with it. Among the products we bought, these took the cake for excessive packaging. The 20 mL of lotion on the left (a refill pack) is packaged first in a multitude of plastic capsules, then a plastic bubble pack, an inner presentation box and an outer presentation box. The cream on the right has a moulded plastic inner case, and a deceptively large outer box — the ratio of packaging volume to actual product is about 20:1.

Chemical peels

Like laser therapy, a chemical peel 'burns' the top layer of skin, causing it to peel off, and new, tighter skin to form. Glycolic acid and trichloroacetic acid (TCA) are the most commonly used chemicals and can be administered by a doctor or dermatologist. It can be quite painful, although you don't have to have an anaesthetic — you may opt for a sedative instead.

How much does it cost? It can cost up to $500 for a full-face peel, and depends on the strength and type of peel.

How long does it take to heal? Seven to10 days. It may tingle and throb for a while after the procedure, and become itchy later on as it heals.

How long does it last? Several years, although it depends on the strength of acid used (which determines how deep the peel is).

Botox injections

'Botox' is botulinum toxin, and kills you if you eat it. But when it's injected into facial muscles, it temporarily paralyses them. This prevents the skin over the muscles from creasing up and causing wrinkles. It only works on so-called expression lines, like frown (vertical) lines and surprise (horizontal) lines, and won't do anything for sun-damaged skin.

It might sound very dangerous, but it's been widely used for many years to treat facial tics and squinting. Possible side effects include a droopy upper eyelid if it's injected too low into the forehead, but this lasts only a couple of weeks.

How much does it cost? Around $350 to $450.

How long does it take to heal? The process itself is painless, although the nearby skin might be a bit pink. You can't lie down or rub the injected area for several hours

afterwards, to prevent the botox spreading to other areas.
How long does it last? About two to three months initially (and longer after continued treatment).

Collagen injections

Collagen can be injected below wrinkles, such as smile and frown lines and crow's feet, to temporarily 'plump' them out. You must have allergy tests before having the treatment as some people react to cows' collagen, which is what's used.
How much does it cost? Around $300 to $800.
How long does it take to heal? There might be some swelling and redness for one or two days.
How long does it last? About three to four months.

Surgical facelift (meloplasty)

Folds of skin and excess fat are cut away and the face is pulled up and stitched at the hairline and behind the ears. It won't do anything for fine lines on photo-damaged skin, and won't prevent further wrinkling.
How much does it cost? Around $10,000 in total, give or take a couple of thousand dollars. If you're getting a quote from a surgeon, ask whether it includes the costs of anaesthetic, operating theatre and hospital bed fees — these can add thousands to your bill.
How long does it take to heal? You'll need about 10 days of rest, and swelling and bruising take two to three weeks to dissipate.
How long does it last? Benefits can last up to 10 years.

Ingredients jargon

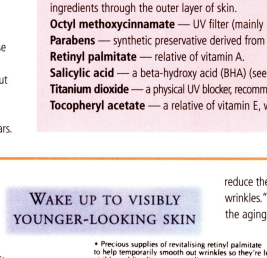
What are all the mysterious ingredients in anti-aging creams, and what do they do?
Aqua — water as a base.
Ascorbyl palmitate — a relative of vitamin C, an antioxidant (see page 21).
Ceramides — a fat-like material produced naturally in the epidermis. The raw material for ceramides in cosmetics often comes from cows' or pigs' brains, although plant sources are also used.
Cetyl alcohol — a fatty alcohol which gives creams opacity and a smooth feel.
Collagen — a fibrous protein in the dermis that provides structure. There's no evidence it gets through the skin when applied in a cream, but it may help the skin surface feel smoother.
Dimethicone — a silicone which traps moisture by forming a film on the skin.
Elastin — a protein found in the skin's dermis, added to face creams as a moisturiser.
Glycerin — attracts water, acting as a moisturiser. Glycerin is a by-product of the manufacture of soap.
Hyaluronic acid — attracts water, acting as a moisturiser. It comes from animals' eyes and roosters' combs, but now can be produced from bacteria.
Liposomes — hollow spheres of fat-like molecules that can penetrate and carry other ingredients through the outer layer of skin.
Octyl methoxycinnamate — UV filter (mainly UVB).
Parabens — synthetic preservative derived from petroleum.
Retinyl palmitate — relative of vitamin A.
Salicylic acid — a beta-hydroxy acid (BHA) (see page 21).
Titanium dioxide — a physical UV blocker, recommended for broad-spectrum UV protection.
Tocopheryl acetate — a relative of vitamin E, which is an antioxidant.

Claims and nonsense

The Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) is responsible for guidelines on what sort of claim is acceptable for cosmetic products, and what's not. Basically, if a claim implies that a product somehow inhibits, influences or modifies a physiological process, then it's making a therapeutic claim. Cosmetic products aren't allowed to make therapeutic claims.

Under the TGA guidelines for anti-aging and anti-wrinkle cosmetics, claims such as "eliminates, reduces, slows or reverses aging or the aging process" are unacceptable. If the claims are qualified to imply it's only a temporary effect on the skin's surface, such as "reduces the *appearance* of aging" or "makes you *look* younger", then the claims are considered cosmetic rather than therapeutic.

Some companies are better than others at abiding by the rules — some soften their claims by using words like 'may' and 'helps', which is perfectly acceptable; some blatantly flout them; others tie themselves in linguistic knots trying to say a lot without saying anything.


WAKE UP TO VISIBLY YOUNGER-LOOKING SKIN
* Precious supplies of revitalising retinyl palmitate to help temporarily smooth out wrinkles so they're less visible and fine lines seem to disappear.
So new, it teaches skin to look younger.
Advanced Bio-Performance is a new formula that for the first time ever works by teaching skin to look younger with:
skin's appearance and texture. The lotion will help the skin to look and feel smoother, healthier and more radiant. Repeated use may also help to reduce the appearance of fine lines and wrinkles.
1. The effective Coenzyme Q10 for a proven reduction of wrinkles.*
12M acts where the skin needs it. by re-launching the production of intercellular gel deep within the skin (patent pending)

Some examples

■ One product toes the TGA line, claiming that it "will help the skin to look and feel smoother, healthier and more radiant. Repeated use may also help to reduce the appearance of fine lines and wrinkles." So it's not claiming to stop or reverse the aging process — but it may help your skin *look* younger.

■ Other examples of acceptable claims include: "Wake up to visibly younger-looking skin" (how else can something *look* younger, if not visibly?) and "[will help] temporarily smooth out wrinkles so they're less visible and fine lines seem to disappear".

■ Claims like "[the product] acts where the skin needs it, by relaunching the production of intercellular gel deep within the skin" and "proven reduction of wrinkles" are skating on thin ice.

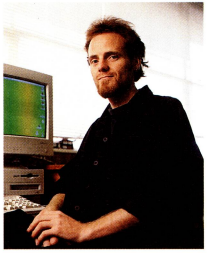
■ Some claims are just plain silly. For instance, one company claimed itsproduct "works by teaching your skin to look years younger". This suggests some kind of cognitive exchange between the product and skin cells, or at the very least some form of basic Pavlovian response.

10 ways to save the cost of your CHOICE subscription

1 Free banking

Are you still paying unnecessary bank fees? In *Banking for free*, March 1998, you'll find bank accounts that don't charge fees for students, pensioners, under 18s and people with disabilities, and those that waive fees if you maintain a specified minimum balance.

If you do most of your banking electronically, rather than over-the-counter, you also stand to gain. See *Pushbutton banking* (also in March 1998) for tips on how to save on expensive over-the-counter transaction fees and which banks offer the best deals.



SAVE! **RH, a uni student from Sydney, changed to one of the accounts recommended in *Banking for free*, and will save $84 on account-keeping fees this year.**

2 Save on large appliances

When you're shopping for large appliances (such as fridges, washing machines, air conditioners and dishwashers), keep in mind that the everyday running costs add substantially to the cost of the product in the long term — sometimes by hundreds of dollars.

Superior energy efficiency (and/or water efficiency) can more than compensate for a more expensive purchase price. CHOICE tells you the expected long-term running costs for all the major appliances we test, so you can save money by taking both price and running costs into account and choosing wisely.

$ In our most recent fridge test, we found you could save up to $745 over 10 years by choosing a fridge with both a low price and cheap running costs, and similarly you could save up to $465 on a washing machine.

3 Could you be getting better interest?

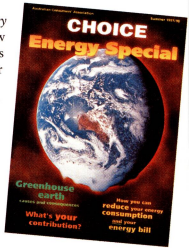
If you've got $2000 or more sitting in an ordinary transaction account, you could be missing out on the interest you deserve. The good news is you can put your money to work for you, without tying it up. *Getting out of the transaction account trap*, May 1997, and *Get more from your cash*, May 1998, show you how.

$ For instance, you could try a cash management trust, which still allows you access to your money, and the higher interest on $2000 could bring in an extra $100 per year.

4 Save money on energy bills

The *CHOICE Energy Special* shows how you can save hundreds each year on your energy bills.

$ You could, for instance, save $65 a year washing your clothes in cold instead of warm water. Our tests of laundry detergents and washing machines show that warm water is not much better than cold for removing dirt.



For other money-saving tips, get your free copy by sending a stamped business-sized envelope to: ***Energy special***, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204.

5 Car insurance

Are you paying more than necessary for car insurance? We went shopping for it (see CHOICE, July 1997), and found that premiums can vary by hundreds of dollars.

One of our readers, LR of Melbourne, put our **CHOICE Buys** to the test and rang two of the companies we recommended for someone in his situation. One premium quoted was about $180 less than his existing cost, and the second was even cheaper than that.

By shopping around for income protection insurance, you could save hundreds of dollars. Use *Insuring your income*, November 1997, as a starting point.

6 Know your consumer rights

CHOICE Consumer Information (CCI) gives valuable advice on consumer rights. Last year, for instance,

Dianne of Victoria wrote to us about a problem with a solar hot water service — the solar panels were starting to corrode after only four years. Dianne argued that since the unit was sealed, the corrosion must have been there since day one, and therefore should be fully covered by the warranty. The manufacturer was willing to replace the panels (they were covered by the warranty), but insisted Dianne would have to pay for labour costs.

SAVE!

CCI suggested what further action she should take and a few months later, threatened with action in the Small Claims Tribunal, the manufacturer yielded, supplying and installing new solar panels for the hot water service at no cost to Dianne.

7 Free credit

Using EFTPOS is quick and convenient, but some banks — and even some shops — charge you a fee for EFTPOS transactions. However, if you pay by credit card, it's the retailer who pays, not you. And if you pay your credit card bill in full each month, free credit is possible. Some cards give you an interest-free period *and* don't charge an annual fee (although you may have to spend a minimum amount each month to qualify). See 'Credit card push comes to shove', *Choice Cuts*, July 1997, and save.

8 Home loans

Getting a good deal on your home loan can save you thousands. Whether you're looking for a loan on a new home or refinancing your current mortgage, call CHOICE Moneyline on 1900 17 00 88 for the lowest-cost loans. For less than $10 we'll tell you the five cheapest options and, if you like, fax or mail you a list of up to 40 loans with details of their features.

Those little amounts add up...

A lot of our readers didn't know that direct deposits from the Departments of Social Security and Veterans Affairs are exempt from financial institutions duty (FID) charges. If you've been charged FID on these payments, ask for a refund. It might not cover the cost of CHOICE, but every little helps. See 'More FID facts' (Choice Cuts, Jan/Feb 1998) for more.

9 Small stories, big savings

It's not always the big product test and finance articles that contain useful information and money-saving tips: the regular smaller sections, like *Your Letters*, *Choice Cuts* and *Shopping Around*, can also be useful.

For instance, Fran Fitzpatrick of NSW read about a CHOICE reader's experiences with St George bank in *Your Letters* in late 1996 and realised she and her husband were in a similar situation, as she explains in the following letter: *"Thank you for publishing the reader's letter regarding St George bank and the 'super rate' fiasco. My husband has had a number of fixed-term deposits with St George over the years, all of which were automatically rolled over as they fell due. He assumed, and so he should, that he'd be given the best rate available for the term and amount of deposit at the time. Not so, as he found out after reading the letter.*

"Thank you very much for this enlightening information. It has repaid subscription costs to CHOICE for a number of years."

St George has informed us that it has since changed its term deposit policy to give its customers the better rate.

10 What to buy

Look out for our Best Buys — good products at a good price.

CHOICE readers discover pretty quickly that you don't have to spend big to get good quality.

We often find some of the highest-scoring products on test are cheaper than others lower down the ranking. And sometimes the more expensive products on test don't perform very well at all. So not only can you save money by buying a cheaper, better product, our product tests will help you to avoid wasting money on goods not up to scratch.

For example:

- The best **pramette** from last year's test (September 1997) was also the cheapest, while the two most expensive — which cost hundreds of dollars more — failed some of our safety tests.
- Our top two **air conditioners** (November 1997) were over $400 cheaper than the other recommended models.
- The **Best Buy** in our **dishwasher** test (July 1997) came equal second overall and cost $160 less than the next cheapest in our *What to buy* list. ❑

Tainted information

Did you notice the word 'advertorial' up in the top right-hand corner of page 27? In CHOICE, of course, this article isn't an advertorial — we take no advertising. But if it were some other publication and you hadn't noticed it, there's nothing else to warn you that the information you're reading is neither objective nor unbiased.

IN BRIEF

- This article looks at some of the ways in which information that consumers trust to be objective and independent is manipulated. We've mainly looked at advertorials and the impact of public relations (PR) work.
- Advertorials are when the line between editorial text and advertising is blurred, while PR encompasses a vast array of strategies designed to influence how information is reported by the media.
- PR and advertorials can amount to a corruption of editorial integrity. With this integrity undermined by forces that are often subtle and sometimes unseen, we can be misled.

THE MEDIA IS ENTRUSTED TO MAINTAIN a very high standard of objectivity and independence. It's an essential component of democracy.

Certain newspapers and magazines — along with some TV and radio programs — are imbued with what's termed 'editorial integrity' because they produce information that people trust. The greatest asset they hold is public confidence. Their credibility is their currency — but as the quotes below illustrate, this credibility may in some cases be more of a facade than a reality.

It's in your interest — as a consumer of information — to be aware of the forces that are powerful enough to twist and turn what you see and read. Sometimes these alterations assume the most subtle, imperceptible form. Other times the compromise of editorial integrity is more readily apparent. Either way, once this information has been manipulated, you're being misinformed.

And if the sleight of hand is smooth enough, you could be completely deceived.

There are a number of ways this information — the kind you trust to be accurate and objective — can be tailored to suit hidden interests and agendas. Two of the most common forms of distortion are advertorials and public relations (PR) work.

Advertorials

Generally speaking, advertorial refers to instances where an advertiser's interests intrude on or mingle with editorial content. This can happen when the financial imperative of satisfying — or, more commonly, not offending — a major advertiser becomes an overriding consideration in editorial decisions. Sometimes it might even be the interests of the publication's owner that are being protected. The outcome of this influence is sometimes impossible to see.

For instance, one of the more frequent examples of advertorial material — and by far the most difficult to detect — involves news that's downplayed, sidelined or never reported. "The sin of omission," John Millard calls it.

John is a producer and reporter at the ABC who, several years ago, blew the whistle on a program for allegedly accepting, without full disclosure, favours from an industry that had an enormous amount of interest in the subject of the show. Since then he's become something of a watchdog for infractions against editorial integrity.

"Every reporter knows where their money is coming from," he says. Knowing who pays their wages and who the big advertisers are — who the publication or program depends on for money — it follows that a sense of self-preservation might make a journalist or

"The company has signed a significant advertising contract ... and there is an obligation on us as a result, to run some editorial material ... over the next few months." ***Rural Press, September 1995***

"The other thing for us to stress is the value of our editorial support. It is for this reason that we should make sure that we do not support products from operators who do not advertise in our papers." ***Rural Press, November 1993***

editor think twice before going ahead with a story that could damage, humiliate or infuriate a corporation whose advertising pays a good proportion of the bills.

But John is quick to point out that the responsibility for this self-censorship can't rest solely on the shoulders of the journalist or editor. It's the reality of the financial balance sheet that produces the pressure not to make waves — and it's a highly competitive industry. Once a program or publication becomes beholden to a major commercial supporter, he says, then the possibility of coercion is there.

is when an advertisement appears close to an article peppered with conspicuous compliments for the product or its manufacturer — see *How flattering!*, below.

ABC radio's *Media Report* covered the subject of advertorials in 1996. The program featured several leaked copies of an internal management newsletter from *Rural Press* — one of the largest media organisations in Australia.

We've shown some excerpts on page 26. They were written by the general manager for agricultural pub-

Don't rock the boat

Richard Evans, from the Communications Law Centre, is familiar with advertorial pressures brought to bear by the marginal economies of a very competitive information industry. He worked for several years as a journalist and has his own stories to tell about being browbeaten to alter articles for fear ofoffending a major advertiser. Richard sees the problem of advertorials growing.

"You have this contracting industry ... where [you've] got to be more competitive. This seems to be generating a reluctance to rock the boat," he said.

The result is that news is not always reported to the fullest, most critical extent, or is left out altogether — which is tough to prove when your only evidence is the absence of information.

"It's utterly impossible to quantify or demonstrate most examples of advertorial content," Richard says, "and the ones you do see tend to be small. The ones you don't hear about are the worst. These are the ones where a journalist hears that a company is doing some serious environmental damage, for example, but because the company is an important advertiser, the journalist never follows up the lead and you never hear about it."

Accentuate the positive

Just as advertorial influence can compel journalists and editors to omit or downplay news, so too can it bring about the inclusion or accentuation of information — burry the negative and emphasise the positive. A tip-off

PERSONAL INVESTMENT

Good oil on our olives

Here in Australia demand for olives is growing at $14.6 million a year and Australian producers have committed capital to irrigate to supply the market.

Australian Olives Ltd, with the help of local investors, is set to reap huge rewards from this new industry by helping to meet this demand.

On current projections, it will take at least 15 years to plant sufficient trees to meet our needs but the potential profits are as certain, as some likely, this could taken even longer.

Australian Olives has developed an investment opportunity that will secure a share of this local market.

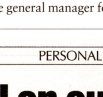
Investors participating in the project will receive a share of the freehold of the land.

As olive trees produce for hundreds of years, this effectively means that investors have created a long-term income stream for themselves — an income that can be enjoyed for life and may still be producing for generations to come.

Between 16 and 18 per cent of all olive products are imported into Australia — costing more than $100 million a year.

The local industry has been unable to take advantage of the existing market, as it is fragmented and based on small family orchards unable to reach economies of scale required to develop the necessary critical mass.

Australian Olives is developing a 2800ha property which will produce 1.5 million litres of extra virgin oil annually.



Producing rewards . . . olives (above) and Tim Myers (above left)

Prices and yields for olives are easily established and using current figures as a base, investors stand to benefit from projected returns of 27.44 per cent averaged over the first 25 years.

Australian Olives' prospectus even provides a detailed taxation opinion from an independent accountant which investors should be able to claim a 10.5 per cent tax deduction on the initial investments of $9139 per given of 1600mp.m. As this could almost double the investor's profit would almost double your return.

Returns from the trees begin in your four when the trees start to produce and continue to increase until trees reach maximum production in Year 11.

A trustee has been appointed to oversee investors' interests.

Applications can be accepted only on the forms contained in the prospectus lodged with the Australian Securities Commission, dated September 17, 1997.

More than 470 information packages have been sent to prospective investors and already applications are flooding in.

To reserve a full information package, free of charge, on Australian Olives, call 1800 244 276.

NATURAL CHOICE

Call it natural selection, the choice many are making to reap rewards from the land.

From emu or ostrich farming to a whole range of crops such as macadamia, olives and kiwifruit, the list is long.

For an initial investment of $8000 into these "natural" products, you can buy, plant and care for 1000 trees and can expect a projected return of up to $30,000 over a period of 10 years.

Alternatively, an investment in the timber industry could reap you fine rewards.

Interesting investors must, however be sure that there is a solid and reliable domestic market for what they want to produce.

Add the risk of drought, fire and other natural disasters and you can see how this type of investment carries a not insignificant risk.

With the Australian Stock Exchange on the Internet, you can browse prospectuses for investments from your own living room.

Conditions in Australia mean that you can grow almost anything, but it is essential you enter into the investment with knowledge.

Research your investment thoroughly. There is no point in owning a beautiful piece of land if the market is saturated; you simply won't sell your product and the investment will be lost.

Tax schemes offer large tax deductions, making them very attractive.

Other investment opportunities include horse racing, wine and fast yabbies.

Last year the Australian Bureau of Agricultural Economics found the value of thoroughbred race horses rose by more than 20 per cent during the 1996-1997 financial year.

Exotic wine layers were also well rewarded with figures showing a 21 per cent return on their quality trade.

The Australian Yabbie Farmers was the last place in Sydney, just ahead of Australian stamp collectors.

27.44%pa
average returns projected for the next 25 years
by investing in Australian Olives Ltd

Tomorrow's olive oil is in your hands. Olives oil and Olives. Your returns start in your five and continues for life, at least 25 years. Plus, you may be able to claim a 10.5% tax write-off on the initial investment of $9,130 and 100% on the annual maintenance of $2,087, the effectively reduce your total investment of $7,087 to as little as $6,565. Your returns will be tax-free. Your investment is in land, not olives. You will of course have to pay tax on the returns from the sale of olives, depending on your personal tax situation.

Year	40.5 cents per litre	50 cents per litre
1	5.84%	5.35%
2	14.98%	12.15%
3	19.06%	16.15%
4	20.02%	17.36%
5	20.33%	21.56%
10	22.07%	29.98%
15	12.07%	47.74%
20	10.28%	44.85%
25	10.01%	44.01%
30	10.76%	49.46%
35	10.63%	54.52%
40	10.56%	57.25%
45	7.98%	61.12%
50	11.07%	66.28%
55	10.75%	70.05%
60	10.75%	73.05%
65	9.56%	75.27%
70	9.56%	77.24%
75	104.27%	94.60%

Projected Returns Over Years 1 - 25

The local market is growing at $14.45 million a year and Australian olive oil market is being won by imports. With the latest planting techniques and mechanised harvesters, we now have a competitive advantage over the traditional European olive growers most of whom have small olive expression, traditional hand harvesting methods.

Various finance packages are available. These finance packages are not part of the prospectus. Unlisted are Grove Bond on FREEHOLD land. 25 yrs. tax deductible.
Limited Gifts — Thousand Only. $25 Allocations
Call now for a free information pack
1800 244 279
Or fill in the form and send or fax to Australian Olives Ltd C/- Reply Paid 991, GPO Box 1616, Brisbane Qld 4001.
Tel 1800 244 279 Fax (07) 3474 5599 1608

Name .....
Address .....
.....PC
Tel (H) ..... (W) .....

Applications can only be accepted on the forms contained within the prospectus lodged with the Australian Securities Commission dated 17th September, 1997.

How flattering!

This upbeat article from *The Daily Telegraph*, on investing in Australian Olives Ltd, includes a bounty of information spelling out how the company is "set to reap huge rewards". It says that investors will be tapping into an indefinite income stream — "an income that can be enjoyed for life and may still be producing for generations to come". The glowing appraisal concludes, quite helpfully, with the contact number for the advertiser.

And directly below the article is an advertisement for — you guessed it — Australian Olives Ltd. Many of the facts and figures cited in the article can be found in the ad.

The article's proximity to and reliance on the ad raise questions about its objectivity.

lishing. The 1993 one demonstrates that advertorial pressure can work in favour of advertisers in a different fashion — by marginalising the competition: "The other thing for us to stress is the value of our editorial support. It is for this reason that we should make sure that we do not support products from operators who do not advertise in our papers. I would ask editors, advertising managers and managers to keep an eye out for press releases from companies who do not advertise, and make sure they do not get exposure."

To find this in writing is unusual — very few newspapers or magazines would issue similarly explicit directives because of the consequences of such a drastic breach of faith.

When there's no editorial unless there are ads...

As the special projects editor for *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Susan Bredow has editorial control over the special-interest sections and supplements, which seem particularly susceptible to advertorial considerations.

These special reports wouldn't exist without advertising. Because they depend so heavily on advertising revenue and many, if not all, of the advertisers have a business interest in the subject of the section, it seems natural that the tone would have to be positive rather than negative.

The benefits of such high-impact supplements were extolled in a notice which recently ran in *The Sydney Morning Herald* to alert advertisers of an upcoming "special colour liftout on great Australian icons". The solicitation said that, "Advertisers in this special report will have the opportunity to showcase their unique attributes as a brand to *The Sydney Morning Herald's* 877,000 affluent and involved readers."

Susan says that while these special reports present great opportunities for advertisers, editorial independence is vigorously maintained for a very simple

Muddy waters

While 'advertorial' refers generally to the manipulation of editorial information, the term is also applied to instances where an advertisement is presented in a manner meant to suggest it's actually a news story — thereby implying a higher degree of credibility.

A common example is seen in Australian newspapers. The page above was taken from *The Sydney Morning Herald*. It's topped by a headline, followed by the body of what appears to be an article. But across the top of the page is written the word ADVERTISEMENT.

It seems apparent that the intention of this ad is to mislead an unsuspecting reader, whose eyes might only quickly scan the page, but still take in the boldface headline. If that grabs their attention, they may continue reading the article without ever seeing the qualification.

Another example, also from *The Sydney Morning Herald*, above right and right, came in the form of a wraparound 'special advertising section' that mimics the regular cover design. In this case the qualification was tucked into the upper right-hand corner, but was dwarfed by the banner title of the regular weekly supplement — there's hardly a more effective vehicle for an advertisement than one that looks like editorial work.

Again, it's a matter of blurring the lines. Is it unreasonable to assume that some readers might be misled in these muddied waters, or that that's the very intention of presenting the information in this way?

reason. "If we started running advertorials, we'd lose our credibility."

It's this fundamental dependence on credibility that can act as something of a regulator on advertorial influence in the media. But the pressures are there, and compromise does happen.

Public relations

Governments, corporations and organisations of virtually every shape and size use public relations campaigns to advance their policies, causes, ideas, products, images and so forth.

But in the extreme, PR has the power to dramatically transform and distort what you see and read — for at its heart, this industry is all about managing and controlling the way the press presents information. John Stauber, from the Center for Media and Democracy in the US, addressed a conference at the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism last year and explained the persuasive manner in which PR can influence, where outright advertising cannot.

"[With] advertising, hopefully when a commercial comes on the television, there's enough critical thought in the viewer to realise this may not be objective information — somebody's trying to sell a product, sell an idea, make me feel a certain way. That's what public relations does too, but it works in an invisible way. In fact, there's an axiom that the best PR is invisible."

How does it work? One way is through a veritable flood of press releases. It's been said that a lot of what people read in newspapers — or see on TV — has been generated by press releases. In this sense, PR can have a tremendous impact on setting the agenda for what becomes news (see *Tracking the impact of PR*, right, for more on this).

In worst-case scenarios, the message that PR is hoping to convey is simply transferred straight into a program or an article, with little or no critical analysis of the issues.

John Stauber talked about the video news releases that are produced by PR firms and provided free to TV newsrooms. "And they're really well done, you know. They come in, they look like news, but they're subtly biased to promote the interests of the PR client." According to Stauber, these video clips find their way into news or current events programs with no reference or disclaimer that they were produced by a PR firm.

Clara Zawawi, a professor of journalism and public relations at Bond University, has seen the same transfer of information in Australian print media. "An enormous amount of what people read in newspapers has been affected in some way by PR work," she said. "Consumers need to be critical of how much information they're getting and whose interest is served by the information. Are they seeing the whole picture? Are they seeing any opposing views?"

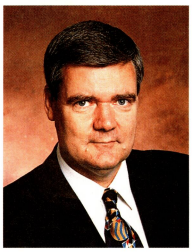
The media must be vigilant

Jim Macnamara, president of the NSW chapter of the Public Relations Institute of Australia, thinks the label of 'PR' is frequently misused, usually in derisive terms to imply some underhanded form of misinformation. But he sees his profession as one that adds value to society.

"Without PR, some information would not get into the public domain, and some groups and organisations would be disenfranchised [because of their lack of access to the media]," he explains.

But as a PR practitioner, he also acknowledges the vital role the media needs to play in scrutinising the information produced by PR firms. "In a healthy,

Tracking the impact of PR



Jim Macnamara, president of the Public Relations Institute of Australia in NSW, undertook a study in 1993 to get a rough idea of how many newspaper stories are generated and shaped by press releases.

He obtained 150 press releases from different companies, organisations and PR firms, and then contracted a media monitoring company to collect — over the course of a year — press articles and electronic media transcripts that were related to the topics addressed in the press releases. Afterwards, he cross-referenced the 2500 articles collected with the press releases.

Of these 2500 stories, the study found that about 30% (768) were wholly or partly based on the press releases he had obtained. Jim also found that 20% of the press releases he tracked were used by the media either verbatim or with only minor grammatical changes.

While focusing on the most common form of PR communication with the media — press releases — this study made no analytical forays into the many other types of PR strategies. In this sense, the results of the survey give only a limited indication of PR's impact on the media. But even if it provides a selective snapshot, the results are still telling. PR plays a significant role in determining what news gets covered, and — in some cases — how the news is portrayed.

The study noted the problems associated with trying to get an accurate measure of overall PR influence. Journalists, Jim claims, are reluctant to acknowledge using PR information, while PR practitioners are hesitant to reveal their 'trade secrets'.

The result according to Jim is that, "Many media consumers are unknowingly reading press releases every day in both the popular and quality press, obscured behind a veil of complicity between journalists and public relations practitioners. The programs broadcast by the electronic media are also heavily influenced by public relations in a range of ways."

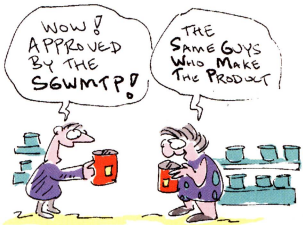
pluralist democracy you must have a strong media. It must remain vigilant." It's a worry, he says, when prepacked PR passes unfiltered onto the pages of a newspaper without any critical analysis or counter views present.

Clara Zawawi shares this concern, and points out that it's the responsibility of journalists and editors to ensure that the information provided by PR firms is given the proper amount of scrutiny before it reaches the pages of a newspaper or a TV news program.

Front groups

PR can take a more clandestine tack than simply petitioning the media with a blizzard of press releases. One of the more infamous PR tactics has involved the manufacture of custom-made advocacy or consumer groups.

By assuming innocuous names — ones that suggest motives detached from corporate interests — these 'front' groups effectively mask their true allegiances to businesses or industries. By doing so, they're able to operate under a more acceptable, albeit false, banner.



Unfettered by any immediate association with their ulterior motives, these groups can affect public opinion or policy by publishing glossy newsletters, putting out press releases, and placing their own spokespeople in the spotlight. The latter strategy is referred to as 'talent placement' by John Millard.

One organisation, the Australian Food Foundation (AFF), which is now defunct, succeeded in placing its talent — and views — on an ABC health program, *Everybody*. The ABC even accepted program sponsorship from the group, whose name didn't seem to suggest any particular affiliations.

But it turns out that the AFF was funded by manufacturers of processed food. So a group funded by the processed food industry partially funded a health program on a network that prizes its non-commercial status above anything else. And *Everybody*'s audience, John said, knew nothing about the peculiar interests of the AFF.

The ABC's general manager for corporate affairs, Roger Grant, told us that the broadcaster has since become more conscious of its affiliations. "As a result of the public's concerns about the advertising and PR industries involving themselves in program making," he stated, "the ABC is now very careful about endorsing commercial interests."

John Millard finds little comfort in these reassurances, pointing out that the ABC's increased outsourcing to production houses makes it difficult, if not impossible, to determine the extent to which commercial influences may be present.

Conclusion

The issue of information manipulation is a tricky one. On one hand, it's important to be aware of the sorts of machinations that can take place just below the surface of print, radio and television. There's a chance you could be reading an advertisement,

Bringing down the 'wall'

In the US recently, much has been made of a trend that's seen the demolition of the 'wall' that's traditionally stood between the editorial and business sides of a newspaper. The idea behind this development is that the paper will function as a more efficient, responsive and profitable enterprise when there's direct interaction between those responsible for sales and marketing and those responsible for editorial content.

This trend has reached the Australian newsroom. Tracie Winch, in the Communication Law Centre's magazine *Communications Update*, examined some of the changes made when a new editor-in-chief was installed at the Melbourne *Age*.

She wrote, "One of the biggest changes, and perhaps the most controversial, has been the corporatisation of the senior editorial position: the merging of the editorial side of the paper with the business side. The traditional separation between 'church' and 'state' no longer exists, though clearly the lines of division had been blurred for some time."

There's a great deal of concern that this type of change makes it easier for business considerations — meaning the interests of advertisers — to impinge upon editorial independence.

But the editor-in-chief of *The Age*, Steve Harris, sees it differently. "While commercial greed and pressure can adversely affect editorial quality and integrity," he said in a university address last year, "media watchers seem reluctant to accept the parallel reality that commercial success is capable of delivering more than any charter of editorial freedom."

While there's a good amount of speculation whether a more robust financial position will alleviate pressures to please advertisers, there still seems to be unease over whether the 'newsroom without walls' will make it easier for business interests to trump editorial decisions.

Infomercials

They sometimes appear in the morning or afternoon, and more often in the doldrums of TV programming late at night, trying desperately to look like legitimate news or talk show programs. While infomercials are still relatively new to Australian TV, in the US — where these glorified and lengthy commercials originated — they've been popular and profitable for years.

While the examples we've seen on Australian networks are more or less transparent in their attempts to masquerade as 'real' programs, infomercials clearly have the potential to develop and grow — particularly with cable TV providing the oxygen for infomercials: cheap and plentiful airtime.

The benefit of camouflaging a 30-minute advertisement is obvious. Watching what appears to be a program, consumers are more likely to lower the hardened shell of scepticism through which the standard string of 30-second ads is viewed (and often dismissed). It lends an advertiser's claims a great deal more legitimacy and impact to be viewed as a program rather than a commercial.

While some might defend infomercials as simply an unorthodox and clever way of selling a product — and one that could never fool anyone into thinking they were anything but commercials — it seems clear that some infomercials are deliberately trying to engineer an illusion.

The commercial television industry Code of Practice doesn't specifically mention infomercials, but it does state that: "A commercial ... must be readily distinguishable by viewers from program material." How this might apply to a polished infomercial dressed up as a talk show is unclear.

The Australian Broadcasting Authority, which enforces the code, says it hasn't had any complaints about deceptive infomercials.

not an article; and there's a chance you could be watching a PR plug, not a program. As a consumer you rely on the media to be independent and objective, and that's not always the case.

On the other hand, it's nearly impossible to provide a useful *What to look for* list to help you identify misinformation. In some instances — such as when a story simply isn't covered — you may never notice the absence of information, or stop to think why one story was buried while another was done up in lights. The undercurrent of undue influence can be impossible to see.

But understanding how and why editorial integrity is sometimes compromised should at least give you pause to view the media in a more critical and vigilant light. Are you seeing every side of the story? ❑

Politics, publishing and profit

Apart from the corrosive power of the advertising dollar, the media is also susceptible to political pressures, which can be just as effective in forcing editorial integrity to buckle and bend.

An example that recently made headlines around the world involved allegations of censorship for the sake of commercial expediency. The uproar happened when Rupert Murdoch ordered his publishing firm, HarperCollins, to drop the publication of the memoirs of Chris Patten, the last British governor of Hong Kong.

Murdoch's decision, some alleged, was nothing more than an act of self-serving deference to the powers-that-be in China. It was purported to have been motivated out of fear that Patten's critical assessment would offend Beijing — and thereby jeopardise or impede Murdoch's designs to extend his satellite television canopy over China.

Patten's subsequent lawsuit against HarperCollins was settled out of court, and the publisher apologised to the author.

Upholding ethics

The Australian Press Council handles complaints about advertorials, which it defines as "stories providing direct support for particular advertisements, conditional on paid advertising appearing".

The Press Council is unequivocal in its contempt for such schemes. "Readers of a newspaper are entitled to expect that news will be presented in good faith. It is a breach of good faith when news is contrived so that stories appear that are conditional on paid advertising and are an integral part of such advertising.

"Such practices must result in a lowering of public confidence in the integrity and independence of newspapers. They are also an affront to proper standards of journalism."

Likewise, the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (the union that covers journalists and editors) has a code of ethics for journalists which states that its members "shall not allow advertising or commercial considerations to influence them in their professional duties". The MEAA will investigate complaints involving its members. Complaints should be made, in writing, to the MEAA branch office in your state.

Concerns about possible advertorials in print media can also be voiced to the Australian Press Council on 1800 025 712 or, in Sydney, on 9261 1930.

With free-to-air television, complaints about any blurred lines between television programs and commercial content should be addressed directly to the broadcaster. If you're not satisfied with the response, refer the matter in writing to the Australian Broadcasting Authority. Complaints about pay TV can be made either to the pay TV provider, or to Debra Richards at the Australian Subscription Television and Radio Association on (02) 9200 1486.

New car warranties

New car warranties demand a certain level of care and attention on the part of the owner. If you don't hold up your end of the deal, you could be opening yourself up for financial hardship.

A STANDARD WARRANTY ON A NEW car usually includes requirements for regular servicing and maintenance. If you fail to meet these conditions, the manufacturer has grounds to invalidate your warranty — which could leave you to cover the cost of repairs. To avoid finding yourself in this position, you need to be aware of your obligations — and your rights — when you buy a new car.

Your warranty expectations

Most new car warranties last for three years or 100,000 km, whichever comes first. The most common warranty requirement is that you have the vehicle serviced after the first 1500 km and then every 10,000 or 15,000 km.

If you fail to meet the requirements of the warranty you could find yourself in a very difficult position (see *The cost of non-compliance*, right). Say you missed a routine service milestone and then a problem developed with the car. If the manufacturer refused to repair it under warranty, the burden would be on you to show that your car's imperfect service history had nothing to do with the problem.

The manufacturers we spoke to professed a willingness to always "give the customer a break" and allow some amount of grace in these matters. But none could define exactly where the line between goodwill and blame would be drawn. "It's really a case-by-case matter — a grey area."

While the manufacturers assured us that in these circumstances they'd only void a warranty if customer negligence were directly responsible for damage, you'd be much better off playing it safe and following the service schedule closely. As one fair trading department said, "It's best not to give the manufacturer an excuse — better safe than sorry."

Your obligations

Get the car serviced on time. It sounds like common sense, but it's not always heeded. The owner's manual should have a coupon for every scheduled service appointment. Make sure you get it signed or stamped when you take the car in for servicing, or obtain some other proof the work was done.

The manufacturer will encourage you to have your car serviced by one of its dealers, but you're not obliged to do so. However, if non-recommended parts are used in your car and a problem develops as a result, the manufacturer could refuse to fix the problem under warranty. You'd have to take the matter up with the garage that serviced your car — there should be a warranty on its work and the parts. Some manufacturers indicated they would maintain their warranty over the rest of the car's system not affected by the non-recommended components.

The warranty may also be voided if the maintenance work carried out by a non-dealer garage is, as one owner's manual states, "not carried out in accordance with [the manufacturer's] specifications". For more on this, see *Where can you go for service?*, right.

Routine maintenance

The owner's manual will tell you what fluids you should check and how often.

Manufacturers strongly recommend that you use the exact type of fluid recommended in the owner's manual, particularly for engine coolants. Problems that stem from non-approved fluids won't necessarily be covered by the warranty.

Some manufacturers are quite particular about the kinds of fluids used in their cars. Holden's owner's manual warns against the use of break-in oil, tune-up compounds, friction-reducing compounds and other additives. It states that: "Their use increases costs, may be detrimental to the operation of your car and may void your New Vehicle Warranty, to the extent that Holden considers the non-recommended fluid to have affected the specifications or quality of your Holden vehicle."

Extreme or abnormal conditions

Your car's manual might stipulate a different set of service requirements for driving in unusual or harsh conditions — say, stop-start driving (inner-city driving), short trips in cold weather, or towing a caravan.

For example, towing a heavy load will put more of a strain on the brakes, so you should replace the brake fluid more frequently.

Your rights

If the dealer refuses to fix a problem under warranty and you want to dispute the decision, the first step is to advance your complaint through the manufacturer's chain of command — talk to the state regional office and then to the national headquarters. If you're still not satisfied, complain to your state fair trading/consumer affairs department. Depending on where you are, it may inspect the car or refer you to a consumer claims tribunal.

Even after a manufacturer voids your warranty you're still protected by the implied warranty rights set out in the Trade Practices Act. Among other things, it guarantees that the car (or any product, for that matter) should be free from manufacturer defects and at a level of quality and performance that would be reasonable to expect.

But if there's a dispute over who's to blame for a problem, the statutory warranty won't necessarily set everything straight. The fact of the matter is, if a manufacturer refuses to fix it under warranty, you're going to have to prove you're not to blame. ❑

THE COST OF NON-COMPLIANCE

It wasn't until its odometer hit 29,000 km that Evan took his Mitsubishi Magna in for servicing. Nothing out of the ordinary was noted during the dealer's service check and afterwards the car performed normally. But about 10,000 km later the engine seized and the car came to a dead stop.

It was towed to the dealer's garage, which began work on the Magna's damaged engine. At the time, Evan was reassured that it was "almost certainly" a warranty problem, so he wouldn't have to worry about a repair bill.

Then, almost four weeks later, the dealer informed him that the repairs would not be covered by the warranty. The engine damage, Mitsubishi claimed, was a result of Evan's negligence. The car had not been taken in for servicing at 10,000 km and 20,000 km, as was stipulated in the warranty.

While the breach of servicing conditions could have caused the damage, Evan had no easy way of knowing whether he was entirely to blame. The NSW Department of Fair Trading advised him that he was in no position to dispute Mitsubishi's decision, given that he failed to uphold his end of the warranty. It ended up costing him over $7000 to repair the car.

The head of Mitsubishi's service department, Bob Stevens, wasn't surprised to learn that the engine seized under these circumstances. Oil left in a vehicle for 29,000 km becomes contaminated and worn out — its lubrication properties virtually disappear.

While Evan admits he's responsible for not getting the car serviced on time, he's still upset that the dealer proceeded with repairs before Mitsubishi finally decided that the warranty wouldn't cover the work. By the time he learned of this decision it was too late to take the car to another mechanic — a move which he believes could at least have saved him money on repairs. Mitsubishi told us that work should not have proceeded until it had been established whether he was to blame, yet it did. But short of lengthy, costly legal action, Evan had virtually no recourse open to him.

WHERE CAN YOU GO FOR SERVICE?

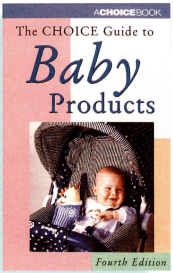
CHOICE reader Peter Elliott is concerned about new car warranties — specifically, the implicit pressure they impose to have all the servicing performed by authorised dealers.

"While I don't disagree with the requirement to use genuine parts and adhere to the service schedule, I am opposed to this 'obligation' to keep going back to the dealership for services to ensure the warranty is not compromised. I know you don't really have to go back to dealers for service but they certainly make you feel like you do if you don't want to have any problems with warranty claims."

Peter's right. The Trade Practices Act prohibits new car warranties from forcing consumers to take their cars to a brand's dealer for servicing — they can only recommend it (which they all do, very strongly). You should be able to have your car serviced wherever you like without jeopardising the warranty — but make certain you keep service records.

However, if the manufacturer claims that a problem developed as a result of substandard servicing from a non-dealer garage, it will refuse to fix it under warranty. If the non-dealer garage also refuses to fix the problem under warranty, you'll be stuck between a rock and a hard place.

CHOICE BOOKS

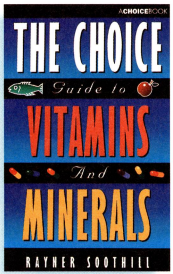


The CHOICE Guide to Baby Products

Fourth edition

Based on CHOICE's own tests plus research conducted especially for this book, it includes practical information about subjects such as cots, pramettes, car restraints, first-aid kits, childcare, maternity bras, feeding your baby, nappies, immunisation and safety.

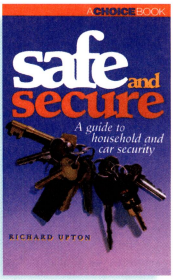
$16 Code: CBP4



The CHOICE Guide to Vitamins and Minerals

If you've ever wondered how much vitamin C you need or what vitamin B_{12} actually does, *The CHOICE Guide to Vitamins and Minerals* is a book you should read. It contains the facts about vitamins and minerals, includes food source tables for each vitamin, and case studies documenting the effects of overdosing on or depriving yourself of a particular vitamin.

$18 Code: CGVM



Safe and Secure

Safe and Secure is full of practical and affordable tips and hints for protecting your family home and belongings. It includes advice about safeguarding a door, creating psychological barriers to burglars, window and door locks, travelling safely and how to improve your personal safety on the street and at home.

$17 Code: S&S

Car Hunting

If you're planning to buy or sell a car, *Car Hunting* strips away the mysteries of the car trade. It covers:

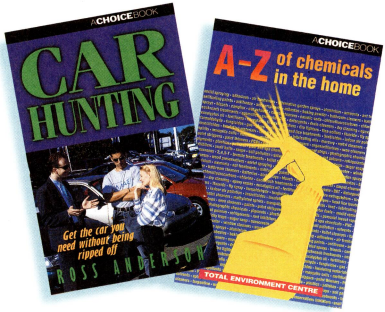
- The tricks dealers use.
- Buying and selling privately.
- How to get the best price for your trade-in.
- How to handle car auctions.

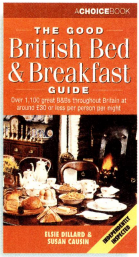
$16 Code: CARH

A–Z of Chemicals in the Home

This alphabetical directory lists common chemicals and the household products that contain them. Each listing describes the chemical or product, and its health and environmental effects. Where possible, each entry lists an alternative, less dangerous product that can be used. A glossary, further reading list and important information about poisons are also included.

$15 Code: AZCH




ACHOICEBOOK
THE GOOD
British Bed & Breakfast
GUIDE
Over 1100 great B&Bs throughout Britain at around £30 or less per person per night
ELSIE DILLARD & SUSAN CAUSIN
IMPROVED EDITION

The Good British Bed & Breakfast Guide

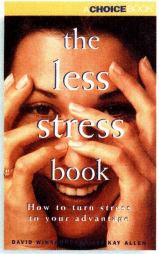
The Good British Bed and Breakfast Guide contains full details of over 1100 of the best affordable B&Bs, listed by area, that charge a maximum of £30 per head. Features and restrictions are listed and colour maps are included.

$30 Code: BB&B

How to Clean Practically Anything

How to Clean Practically Anything provides you with cleaning advice for every part of your home. It includes a comprehensive stain-removal guides, recipes for cleaning products, advice about hiring a professional cleaner and an easy-to-follow cleaning calendar.

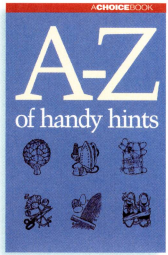
$17 Code: HCPA



The Less Stress Book

The Less Stress Book is a down-to-earth, practical guide to coping with, surviving and even flourishing on everyday stress. It includes explanations, case studies, checklists and exercises to help you manage stress.

$16 Code: LSB



A–Z of Handy Hints

A-Z of Handy Hints is a compilation of household hints for everyday situations. Written in a delightful and friendly way, it is not only useful but a fun read and a lovely gift.

$15 Code: AZHH

New from CHOICE Books

Making Sense of the Family Court

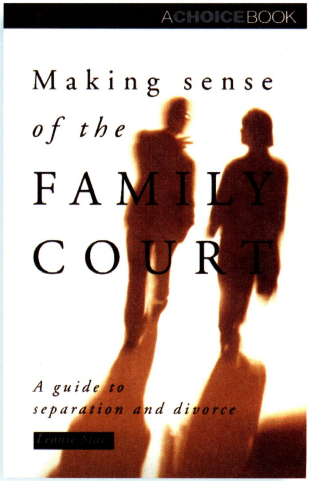
Leonie Star

Family breakdown is distressing, complicated and confusing. *Making Sense of the Family Court* aims to make separation and divorce less stressful for all involved. Written in everyday language, it outlines the processes of the Family Court. It explains clearly:

- What will happen at each step in separation and divorce.
- How the court helps couples to solve disputes.
- What the court will do if the parties can't agree.
- What to do in cases of family violence, abduction of a child, non-payment of child support, denial of access.
- Where to find help and information.

It includes a glossary of legal terms and phrases and a list of forms used by the Family Court.

$16 Code: MSFC



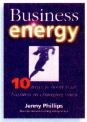
CONSUMER BOOKSHELF

Australian Guide to Getting Published

$17
Code: AGGP

Are We on the Same Team Here?

$20
Code: AWST



Business Energy

$25
Code: BUEN

Backyard Insects

$25
Code: BYIN

Computers and Your Kids

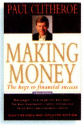
$20
Code: CAYK

Get Smart or Ripped Off

$10
Code: GSRO

Let's Move!

$17
Code: LM



Making Money

$20
Code: MMEY

Speaking Persuasively

$25
Code: SP

The Honorary Treasurer

$20
Code: THT

When Will the Children Play?

$18
Code: WWCP

Life's Little Learning Activities Birth-2 & 3-5

$13 for both
Code: LLLA

Order Form

Code	Title	Qty	Item price	Total price

Plus postage and handling ($3 for one item plus $1.20 for each extra item) _____

Total _____

I enclose ❑ cheque ❑ money order (payable to the Australian Consumers' Association)

or, I wish to pay by: ❑ Bankcard ❑ Mastercard ❑ Visa ❑ Amex ❑ Diners Club Expiry ___ / ___

Card number

Name on card . . . . . Signature . . . . .

Mr/Mrs/Miss/Ms . . . . . Subscriber number . . . . .

Address . . . . .

. . . . . Postcode . . . Phone (bus.) . . . . .

Send your payment to: Australian Consumers' Association, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204 • Phone (02) 9577 3277 • Fax (02) 9577 3355

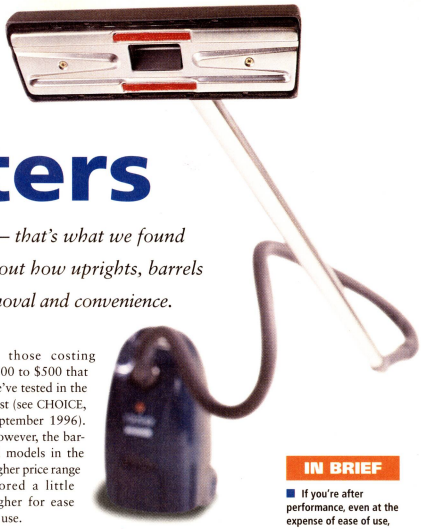
Money-back guarantee: If you are not completely satisfied with your purchase, return book(s) within 30 days for full refund of the purchase price.

Some books may have to be sent separately to keep postage costs down. Please allow 2 to 3 weeks for delivery. If any order cannot be filled for a substantial length of time, we'll let you know and give you the option of cancellation.

CB/9807

TEST REPORT

Dirt busters



A bit of the usual and a few surprises — that's what we found in our latest vacuum cleaner test. Find out how uprights, barrels and a canister model scored for dirt removal and convenience.

MOST OF OUR VACUUM CLEANER tests in the past have produced similar results: uprights generally beat barrels and canisters on performance, but they're less convenient because they're more difficult to use under low furniture, on stairs or in tight corners.

For these situations barrel or canister models are usually more suitable — you can reach into confined spaces with the long wand or hose, pulling the heavier motor compartment behind you. But for the added convenience you're likely to get a worse performer.

This test confirmed those findings, but also had some surprises. We have yet to find a barrel cleaner that picks up nearly as much dirt as a good upright. The best barrel model in this test only managed to pick up 27% of our 'standard dirt' — that's just over half of what the top-scoring upright achieved.

But not all uprights are better performers — one delivered worse results than many of the barrels. The third in this test, while placed second overall, removed much less dirt than the top performer.

The table (pages 40 and 41) lists all relevant details about the cleaners we tested and how they performed. For more details of the models we recommend you buy, see the profiles on pages 38 and 39.

What we tested

Barrels are the most popular choice of vacuum cleaner in Australia, outselling both upright and canister types by a large margin. We based our selection for this test on this trend and chose nine barrels and one canister, selling for $179 to $229 and three uprights priced up to $249 (uprights tend to be more expensive).

This is a popular price range and, as our test results show, for good reason. Some vacuum cleaners in this price range are just as good at dirt removal as those costing $400 to $500 that we've tested in the past (see CHOICE, September 1996). However, the barrel models in the higher price range scored a little higher for ease of use.

Power and performance

As we found in previous vacuum cleaner tests, a higher wattage doesn't necessarily mean better performance — the design is even more important.

The least powerful unit in this test, the **HOOVER U1432 Breeze** upright, scored best for dirt removal by a considerable amount. This was also the only 'fan before bag' style cleaner in our test.

In models of this design, the cleaning head, helped by the rotating brush, picks up the dirt, which is then sucked through the motor's fan and blown into the dustbag. While this gives more effective cleaning, it means that the fan blades can come into contact with small items left on the carpet, which could damage the blades.

The barrel and canister models use extra power because they have to suck the air and dust through a long hose and/or wand, then through the dustbag and, in most models, through an additional filter to protect the motor. Because of this design they're less effective even though they may have a higher wattage.

The other two upright models in our test work in a similar way to the barrel and canister cleaners, with the fan behind the bag, and are correspondingly less effective.

IN BRIEF

- If you're after performance, even at the expense of ease of use, get an upright cleaner — our top-scoring model beat all others we tested by a large margin.
- A power head can significantly improve a cleaner's performance. A turbo head, on the other hand, had the opposite effect and in our test actually lowered the cleaners' performance. (see page 38).

Power heads and turbo heads

You can buy an optional power or turbo head for some barrel vacuum cleaners. Both types of head are designed to increase cleaning performance by working similarly to an upright cleaner's head.

This is how they work. With a **power head**, when you switch on the vacuum cleaner, a small electric motor in the cleaning head also comes on and drives a rotating brush. So, in addition to the normal vacuum cleaner's suction, you get a brushing action to remove dirt from the carpet fibres.

None of the models in this test had an optional power head, but in previous tests we've found they can significantly improve cleaning performance.

A **turbo head** has a small turbine inside the cleaning head. It's driven by the air being sucked in, and rotates a brush via a belt. The brush, rotating at high speed, then beats the carpet pile, which is supposed to release the trapped dirt.

However, they failed to deliver on the models we tested with an optional turbo head (the **VOLTA U208GH Elite** and the **SANYO** models **BSC-1200A** and **SC-75AR**). Performance dropped dramatically when the turbo head was used. We've also found this in some previous tests. This is probably because energy needed for suction is sacrificed to drive the turbine. CHOICE recommends you don't waste your money on a turbo head.

Noise

If you want a reasonably quiet vacuum cleaner, you'll be better off with a barrel model. In our test, the noisiest two were uprights (the **HOOVER U1432 Breeze** and the **SANYO SC-A5A**). The **PHILLIPS HR 8331 Expression** and the **VOLTA U208GH Elite** recorded only medium-range noise levels, but made an irritating, high pitched noise.

WHAT TO BUY

The **HOOVER** upright model listed below scored best overall by a considerable amount. Although coming second best, the **EUREKA** upright performed considerably worse than the top performer, but was a little easier to use and slightly less noisy.

If you prefer a barrel model, the **HOOVER** barrel scored best within this category. Of the rest, only the **VOLTA** and **PHILIPS** barrels scored 25% or more for dirt removal.

Upright models	
HOOVER U1432 Breeze	$199
EUREKA AU4335 The Boss	$249
Barrel models	
HOOVER 1250SOAUS	$199
VOLTA U208GH Elite	$199
PHILIPS HR 8331 Expression	$179

PROFILES

The recommended models are profiled in rank order from left to right. Prices shown are a good target to aim for when shopping around, based on nationwide checks in May 1998. Anything lower is a bargain.

HOOVER U1432 Breeze

Target price: $199
Type: Upright

Good points

- Best in this test for dirt removal.
- Has a good range of tools with on-board storage.
- Can be adjusted for different carpet pile height.

Bad points

- No cord retraction.
- No dustbag-full indicator.
- Noisiest machine tested.
- Short reach from power point.
- Carpet height adjuster requires some effort to move.

EUREKA AU4335 The Boss

Target price: $249
Type: Upright

Good points

- Second best in this test for dirt removal.
- Has a good range of tools with on-board storage.
- Can be adjusted for different carpet pile height.

Bad points

- Much worse than the **HOOVER** upright for dirt removal, but still better than the barrels and canister.
- No cord retraction.
- No dustbag-full indicator.
- The handle is a little difficult to release from the upright position in which it is stored.
- On/off switch is a little flimsy.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

The first choice: upright, barrel or canister?

■ Uprights are generally better performers, but they need more (and tall) storage space and are more awkward to use on stairs and under low furniture.

■ Canister models are similar to barrels, except that the canister you pull behind you is upright — barrels are horizontal.

While barrel cleaners may be easier to use on stairs and under low furniture, they're generally worse at dirt removal.

In the shop

When you're looking for a vacuum cleaner, try out various models in the shop.

■ Have them connected to power to hear how **noisy** they are (uprights are generally noisier than barrel models).

■ While the cleaner is on, check to see that the **head glides easily** without scraping or sticking over hard and carpeted surfaces.

■ Move them around to see whether they're **comfortable**, **not too heavy** and **manoeuvrable** enough for your requirements.

■ The **on/off switch** should be well marked, easy to reach and operate.

■ Check whether there is sufficient **cord length**.

■ Check out the **dust collector**. For more information on the various types available, see table note 2, on page 41.

■ If the cleaner is used with **disposable dustbags**, check where you can buy them and how much they cost.

Accessories

■ Check whether **tools** such as a crevice nozzle (for narrow corners and around chair cushions), an upholstery brush (for curtains and soft furnishings) and a dusting brush are supplied with the vacuum cleaner or have to be bought as an extra.

Additional features

■ **Adjustable head height:** You can usually adjust the height of the bristles from the carpet on an upright, which may be usual if you have carpets with different pile heights.

■ **Power head and turbo head:** Some barrel models have optional power or turbo heads available that are supposed to improve their performance — see page 38 for comments on their effectiveness.

■ **Blower:** If you often need to blow up an airbed, look for a vacuum cleaner where you can reverse operation and blow out air.

■ **Filter:** If you want a vacuum cleaner with a special 'allergy' filter (HEPA, HEPA S-Class or electrostatic filter), check our report in the August 1997 issue of CHOICE. Vacuum cleaners with these special filters are generally more expensive and release less dust back into the air. None of the models in this test makes specific claims about filtering small particles or dust mites. They have a standard filter (or two filters), which needs cleaning or replacing from time to time.

'On-board' storage means you always have these tools to hand when you need them and you don't need extra storage room for bits and pieces. Check whether there's easy access to the on-board storage space. Pictured are a Hoover upright and barrel.

HOOVER 1250SOAUS

Target price: $199
Type: Barrel

Good points

■ Has a good range of tools with on-board storage.
■ Easy to use under low furniture.
■ Long reach from power point.
■ Variable suction.

Bad points

■ Heavy.
■ Vacuuming can become tiring because of the strong suction.

VOLTA U208GH Elite

Target price: $199
Type: Barrel

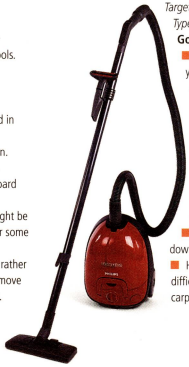
Good points

■ Has a good range of tools.
■ Easy to use under low furniture.
■ Better than others at cleaning around edges and in corners.
■ Variable suction.

Bad points

■ No on-board storage.
■ Wand might be too short for some people.
■ Head is rather difficult to move over carpet.

PHILIPS HR 8331 Expression



Target price: $179
Type: Barrel

Good points

■ Variable power so you can vary the amount of suction.
■ Long reach from power point.
■ Easy to use under low furniture.

Bad points

■ No on-board storage.
■ You have to bend down to turn it on or off.
■ Head is rather difficult to move over carpet.

VACUUM CLEANERS

1

	Brand / model (in rank order)	Manufacturer / distributor	Origin	Target price ($) *	Warranty (years)	Reach (m)	Weight (kg)	Power, measured at maximum speed (W)	Crevice tool	Upholstery tool	Dusti brush
	HOOVER U1432 Breeze (U)	Southcorp	Australia	199	2	6.2	6.5	410	✓	✓	✓
	EUREKA AU4335 The Boss (U)	Eureka	US	249	2	7.9	6.4	1310	✓	✓	✓
	HOOVER 1250SOAUS	Southcorp	Czech Republic	199	2	8.9	8.0	1250	✓	✓	✓
	VOLTA U208GH Elite	Electrolux	Australia	199	2	8.4	7.2	1220	✓	✓	✓
	PHILIPS HR 8331 Expression	Philips	China	179	2	9.0	6.9	1070	✓	✓	
	SANYO SC-75AR	Sanyo	China	199	2 (A)	8.4	6.9	1320	✓		✓
equal	**PANASONIC** MC-4760	Panasonic	Malaysia	179	2	8.3	6.8	1110	✓	✓	✓
	PANASONIC MC-4860	Panasonic	Malaysia	199	2	8.3	7.3	1300	✓	✓	✓
	SANYO BSC-1200A (C)	Sanyo	China	199	2 (A)	10.0	7.6	1200	✓		✓
	HITACHI CV-2800	Hitachi	Singapore	189	2	8.3	5.7	1190	✓		✓
equal	**DAEWOO** RC-805	Daewoo	Korea	229	2 (B)	9.3	7.6	1080	✓		✓
	SANYO SC-A5A (U)	Sanyo	Mexico	199	2 (A)	6.0	7.2	1000	✓	✓	✓
	HITACHI CV-4700A	Hitachi	Singapore	199	2	8.3	6.3	1110	✓		✓

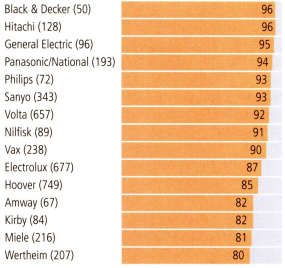
How reliable have our subscribers found them?

We surveyed a group of subscribers and asked whether they had had any problems with their vacuum cleaners in the previous 12 months. On average, only 12% had needed repairs and the most frequent problems concerned the hose or wand (9%) or suction (6%). The average cost of repair was around $70.

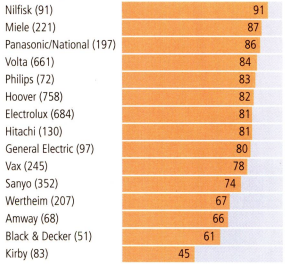
Barrel vacuum cleaners were the least likely to need repair (10%), upright models the most likely (14%).

The graphs (right) show the results for those brands (not individual models within brands) for which we received sufficient answers. The number in brackets tells you how many readers reported on the brand. Note that the results of the survey also include brands not tested, and that we don't have reliability data for all brands on the market.

Percentage not needing repair



Percentage who would buy the same brand again



For people with disabilities

People with a disability should look for a vacuum cleaner that:

- Has controls that are easy to use.
- Has a dustbag that is easy to empty and replace (or a dust collector that is easy to clean).
- Has accessories that are easy to use.
- Is lightweight and easy to manoeuvre.

An occupational therapist from the Independent Living Centre examined the vacuum cleaners in this test for their suitability for people with a physical disability. No one model stood out particularly, but three rated better than the rest.

The **HOOVER U1432 Breeze** upright, although heavy to manoeuvre, has its on/off switch in a handy position. It's easy to release the handle from the upright position in which it is held for storage, and there's easy access to the dustbag.

The **DAEWOO RC-805** barrel (left) is easy to manoeuvre, has a good grip, with the variable suction switch located at thumb level, and has markings that are easy to read. While not as easy to use as the **DAEWOO**, the **HITACHI CV-2800** barrel is much lighter to carry. Unfortunately, neither of these two cleaned very well.

2	2	3	3		4	5	6	7		
-board cessory rage	Dust collector	Dustbag-full indicator	Variable suction (bleed valve)	Variable power	Blower	Noise (dB)	Dirt removal score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Overall score (%)	Brand / model (in rank order)
	Paper					81	52	61	55	**HOOVER** U1432 Breeze (U)
	Paper					75	36	67	45	**EUREKA** AU4335 The Boss (U)
	Paper	✓	✓			68	27	70	40	**HOOVER** 1250SOAUS
	Paper	✓	✓		✓	71	25	71	39	**VOLTA** U208GH Elite
D)	Paper		✓	✓		69	26	66	38	**PHILIPS** HR 8331 Expression
	Cloth	✓	✓		✓	71	22	71	37	**SANYO** SC-75AR
	Paper	✓	✓	✓	✓	67	18	80	37	**PANASONIC** MC-4760
	Paper	✓	✓	✓	✓	67	18	80	37	**PANASONIC** MC-4860
	Metal body	✓	✓		✓	75	23	64	35	**SANYO** BSC-1200A (C)
	Plastic body	✓	✓		✓	66	17	69	33	**HITACHI** CV-2800
D)	Cloth	✓		✓		60	17	64	31	**DAEWOO** RC-805
	Paper					77	18	61	31	**SANYO** SC-A5A (U)
	Cloth	✓	✓			64	13	71	30	**HITACHI** CV-4700A

equal

equal

* Prices shown are a good target to aim for when shopping around, based on nationwide checks in May 1998.

(U) Upright model.

(C) Canister model.

The others are all barrel models.

(A) One year for tools and hose.

(B) The warranty card supplied with this model stated a two-year warranty. However, Daewoo says it's covered for three years.

(D) Stored on the wand.

1 Power

We measured the power input to find out whether a higher-wattage cleaner is automatically better at removing dirt than a lower-wattage model. The answer is no — see *Power and performance* on page 37 for details.

2 Dust collector / dustbag-full indicator

Vacuum cleaners usually have a dustbag (paper or cloth) to collect the dust, but some do without. In the **SANYO** canister model and the **HITACHI CV-2800** barrel the dust is collected in the cleaners' metal or plastic housing.

Machines with disposable paper dustbags are much easier to empty and clean than those with reusable cloth bags, which have to be shaken to remove the dirt. This can be messy and might create problems for people with allergies. To minimise the dust particles in the air, it's a good idea to put a plastic bag around the bag when you're emptying it.

The down side of disposable dustbags is that you have to keep buying them — a matter of ongoing costs and possibly special trips to a shop that sells them.

A **dustbag-full indicator** may be useful, but vacuum cleaners generally perform better if they're emptied regularly.

3 Variable suction/variable power

Some barrel cleaners have a 'bleed' valve on the wand which you can open during use to lower the suction. This way, thinner rugs or curtains are less likely to be sucked into the cleaning head. When the valve is open, the noise level generally increases.

On some machines you can lower the suction by reducing the cleaner's power, which also reduces its noise level.

4 Noise

We measured noise from the user's position. Uprights are generally noisier than barrel models; the only canister cleaner in this test was just as noisy as one of the uprights. See *Noise* on page 38 for comments on specific models.

5 Dirt removal score

We embedded 100 grams of specially prepared dirt into a section of carpet and vacuumed it to a set pattern and speed. The dirt collected was then weighed and recorded as a percentage of the dirt applied. After doing this three times for each cleaner, we averaged the results.

We used a 100% nylon carpet, which is the most popular type of domestic carpet in Australia. On other carpet types, the differences between cleaners may not be so marked, but the comparisons remain valid.

6 Ease of use score

This was based on how easily the body of the vacuum cleaner could be manoeuvred, how easy it was to move the cleaning head over carpet and under low furniture, how close it could get to edges and into corners, how difficult it was to empty and change the dustbag and how easy it was to use the accessories.

We also considered use on stairs, on-board accessory storage, a blower function and controls.

7 Overall score

We calculated the overall score by weighting dirt removal and ease of use as follows:

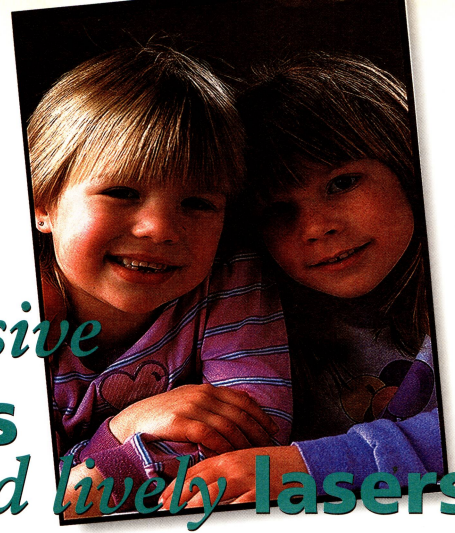
- Dirt removal: 70%.
- Ease of use: 30%.

Test changes

Some aspects of this test have been changed to reflect trends in carpet buying and consumer expectations of vacuum cleaners. So the scores in this test are not directly comparable with those of previous tests.

- We used a different type of carpet, and new pieces of carpet for each vacuum cleaner.
- We slightly changed the composition of the dirt mixture.
- We also changed the overall score weighting (increasing dirt removal from 60% to 70% and reducing ease of use from 40% to 30%), as we think the most important aspect of a vacuum cleaner for most people is how well it cleans.

The best inkjet models in our tests can produce near-professional colour print quality.



Impressive inkjets and lively lasers

IN BRIEF

- **The top-performing inkjet printers in our test produced almost the same print quality as professional printing equipment — even on normal photocopying paper. However, they're relatively slow.**
- **The lasers tested were all very fast and produced excellent-quality text. But if you want more from your printer, say printing graphics (in shades of grey or colour), an inkjet is the way to go.**
- **With lasers you generally get what you pay for: the more expensive models were the best performers overall. With inkjets, on the other hand, you can get models that are excellent value for money.**

MODERN PRINTERS HAVE COME a long way from the dot-matrix monsters that were common some years ago. Our test of eight black-and-white laser and 10 colour inkjet models for home use shows that some models can almost match the quality of professional printing equipment (see *Speed and quality*, right, for details on how they performed).

How they work

Laser printers use static electricity to attract toner from a cartridge onto a rotating drum. From there it's transferred to the sheet of paper, which is then heated to bond the toner to it.

Lasers for home use (such as the ones tested) can print only in black-and-white — colour lasers are available, but they're much more expensive.

Inkjet printers have a moving print head that squirts tiny drops of ink from a cartridge directly onto the paper. All the inkjets tested can print in both black-and-white and colour.

How to get started

You need to check before you buy whether the printer driver software, which comes with your printer, can be used with your computer's operating system.

The printer driver translates between the computer software (such as a word processing or spreadsheet program) and the printer — for example, it interprets how the different inks have to be mixed to create the colours you see on your screen. It also gives you access to print features such as different print quality levels (such as normal or high resolution), paper size and orientation.

If your operating system is Windows 95 and the driver is compatible with it, all you have to do to set up most modern printers is connect them to your PC and run the so-called plug-and-play software, which will automatically lead you through the installation of the printer driver and things like additional typefaces.

If you have any other operating system you'll need to check the printer's manual for how to install the software. The **PANASONIC KX-P6100** in this test came with a driver for Windows 3.1 (an older operating system), and we had some trouble getting it to work with Windows 95. We're surprised a printer is still being sold with software for such an old operating system — all the others came with a Windows 95 driver.

If you're still working with DOS, the following models aren't for you — they need Windows to operate: **CANON BJC 7000, HEWLETT PACKARD**

DeskJet 720C, LEXMARK Color Jetprinter 1000 and OKI Oki Page 4W.

All of the models tested are PC-compatible. If you have a Macintosh computer, check our table, page 46, for models that offer a standard or at least an optional Mac interface.

Macs have always had plug-and-play, so disks or CD-ROMs that come with the printer should contain software that will set up and run the printer with your Mac.

If you need a different driver or an update, you can usually get one from the printer manufacturer or via its Web page (see *Where to get a driver*, below right, for details).

Speed and quality

We tested the speed and quality of the printers for various tasks: text and graphics in black-and-white and grey tones (for both lasers and inkjets), colour graphics at normal and high resolution (inkjets only) and colour photos (inkjets only).

■ There seems to be only one reason for buying one of the laser printers tested: if you regularly need to print high volumes of text. In that case, their combination of quality (except that of the PANASONIC KX-P6100, whose text quality wasn't so good) and speed was hard to match by inkjets — only the HEWLETT PACKARD DeskJet 890Cxi and DeskJet 720C came close.

For example, most lasers tested (and the HEWLETT PACKARD DeskJet 890Cxi) printed five pages of text in about one minute, while most other inkjets tested took about 2.5 minutes for the same task. With the EPSON Stylus Color 300 you'd have to wait 9.5 minutes.

■ Plain text is really the limit for the lasers we tested. While they're still fast, their print quality for graphics in grey tones falls way behind that of the top inkjets on test.

■ If you want to be able to print in colour, there's only one economical choice: an inkjet printer.

■ The top five inkjet models produced high-quality printouts no matter what the task. The others couldn't match them for quality of text, grey graphics and colour graphics at normal resolution. However, they could all produce good results in high-resolution mode (except the LEXMARK Color Jetprinter 1000) and when printing colour photos.

■ Colour printing took time with all of the printers tested (particularly high-resolution graphics and photos), but the lack of speed of some models could drive you mad. For example:

— A single-page spreadsheet (including coloured rows and a chart) printed at normal resolution on normal paper took only 71 seconds on the EPSON Stylus Color 600, but seven minutes on the EPSON Stylus Color 300.

— A desktop-publishing document printed at high resolution on high-quality paper took less than five minutes on the EPSON Stylus Color 600, but more than 13 minutes on the EPSON Stylus Color 300.

— A colour photo printed on a very high-quality paper took around six minutes to print on the HEWLETT PACKARD DeskJet 890Cxi and DeskJet 720C, but around 21 minutes on the CANON BJC 7000.

WHAT TO BUY

■ **Inkjets: for text, graphics and photos in black-and-white or colour.**

equal	EPSON Stylus Color 600	$449
	HEWLETT PACKARD DeskJet 890Cxi	$799
equal	EPSON Stylus Color 400 BEST BUY	$299
	HEWLETT PACKARD DeskJet 720C	$599

■ **Lasers: for black-and-white text.**

NEC Superscript 860	$849
BROTHER HL-1060	$999
KYOCERA Ecosys FS-600	$685

Where to get a driver

You need to check your printer comes with software (a 'driver') that can be used with your computer's operating system (see *How to get started*, left).

Drivers for less common operating systems are usually available from the manufacturer on their Web page.

Here's where to go.

■ Brother: Phone: (02) 9887 4344; Website: http://www.brother.com/E-ftp/softwin.html#printer

■ Canon: Phone: (02) 9805 2864, or head office in your nearest capital city; Website: http://www.canon.com.au/software.htm

■ Epson: Phone: 1300 361 054 or in Sydney, 9903 9000; Website: http://www.epson.com.au/downloads_set.html

■ Hewlett Packard: Phone: 13 13 47; Website: http://www.hp.com/cposupport/nonjsnav/prhome.html

■ Kyocera: Phone: 1800 257 159; Website: http://www.kyocera.com/printers/drivers.html

■ Lexmark: Phone: (02) 9930 3629; Website: http://www.lexmark.com/software/software.html

■ NEC: Phone: 1800 812 796; Website: ftp://ftp.nec.com.au/PUB/PRINTERS/DRIVERS/

■ Oki: Phone: (02) 9698 8211; Website: http://www.oki.com.au/drivers.html

■ Panasonic: Phone: 13 26 00; Website: http://www.panasonic.com (Panasonic's Australian Website was still being established at the time of writing.)

Portable printer

The CANON BJC 80 is marketed as a portable printer. It weighs only 2 kg and can be run on rechargeable nickel-metal-hydride (NiMH) batteries (one charge lasts for around 225 text pages, and recharging takes about 10 hours).

It's also got an infrared device adaptor (IrDA). So if your computer also has this feature (notebooks often do) — and both the IrDAs have the same specifications and 'understand' each other (check with Canon before you buy) — you can print without directly connecting the printer to the computer.

Another useful feature of the CANON BJC 80 is an optional scan kit ($149) that can be exchanged for the print head and allows you to scan documents or photos, for example, into your computer's memory.

Computer CHOICE **magazine will be testing scanners, including the one for the CANON, for an upcoming issue.**

Paper costs

With lasers and for the everyday use of inkjets, you're likely to use normal photocopying paper — with good results for most of the models tested.

However, printer manufacturers offer a range of special-purpose and high-quality papers for inkjets, which usually give you better results for colour graphics and photos.

Expect to pay between $30 and $40 for 200 sheets of special inkjet paper, and around $1 to $1.50 per sheet of photo paper — compared to around $6 for 500 sheets of normal photocopying paper.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Before you go shopping, there are a number of things you need to know about what you want from a printer:

- Will you be printing mainly text? Or will there also be graphics and photos — and if so: will a black-and-white printout do, or do you want colour?
- Do you want to connect it to a PC or a Mac?
- Do you want to be able to print from older-style operating systems such as DOS, Windows 3.1 or Mac OS 7.1 (see page 42)?
- Do you want to be able to print on special stationery such as different paper types, transparencies, envelopes or paper sizes other than A4?

When in the shop:

- Ask to see models that meet your requirements.
- If you're buying an inkjet printer, check whether the black and the colour cartridges can be installed at the same time. On older models, you may have to swap between them, depending on the print task — which can be tedious. Also check whether colour cartridges can be changed individually — with some older models you have to change all the inks even if you've only run out of yellow, say.
- Ask for demonstration printouts and check them, for example, for over-inking (is the ink running or soaking through the paper?), how well they distinguish between different shades of the same colour, and for the sharpness of lines.
- And while it's printing: check how noisy the printer is.
- Manufacturer information such as the best resolution (in dots per inch — DPI), or how many pages per minute the model can print, may be a rough indication of a printer's quality and speed. However, our tests have shown that print quality is influenced by more than just the resolution, and that the pages per minute figures are often overstated. We used a letter with 1500 characters per page; manufacturers may use shorter letters when assessing the speed of their models.
- Make sure you get a printer cable — it usually isn't a standard accessory.

Environmental imprint

Energy consumption

We measured how much energy the printers use to print 100 pages of text, when in standby mode, and when switched off. (Interestingly, and for no apparent reason, most of the inkjets and some lasers draw small amounts of power (up to 7 W) even when they're switched off. If this bothers you, we recommend you switch your printer off at the wall socket after use.)

We then calculated the yearly energy costs if you were to print 2000 pages of text, had the printer on standby for 1000 hours and switched off for the rest of the year (we used an electricity price of 12 cents per kWh).

While the differences are considerable, they probably wouldn't influence your purchase decision: the yearly power costs range from around 80 cents (**OKI Oki Page 4W**, **EPSON Stylus Color 300**) to $7.40 (**CANON BJC 7000**).

Hazardous substances

We checked the printers' plastic casings for a number of potentially hazardous substances, particularly those sometimes used in flame retardants.

Electronic products such as TVs, VCRs, computers and printers contain electronic circuit boards that — if they malfunction — may overheat or even catch fire.

To prevent the whole product from catching fire in this instance, some manufacturers treat the plastic casing of their products with flame retardants that are designed to prevent the plastic from burning — it may still smoulder, though.

Some of the chemicals used as flame retardants are quite complex organic compounds containing bromine. In a fire, or if the casing is smouldering, these compounds may form highly toxic substances (called dioxins and furans).

Another chemical that's added to plastic casings to support flame retardants contains antimony, and can also be dangerous if inhaled (which may happen in a fire).

We found bromine and antimony in some of the printers' casings (see *What about the rest?*, right), and downgraded models that contained 1% or more of either of them.

Noise

We assessed the printers' noise both while preparing to print, and during printing. While some models were a bit noisier than others, none was annoyingly loud.

Inkjets

EPSON Stylus Color 600

Target price: $449

Good points

- Generally very high print quality.
- Excellent colour print quality.
- Fast at printing grey graphics.
- Equal fastest at printing colour graphics.
- Comes with a Mac interface as standard.
- The ink cartridges are very easy to change.

Bad points

- Slow at printing text.
- Print costs are relatively high.
- Printer software provided on CD-ROM only.

Lasers

NEC Superscript 860

Target price: $849

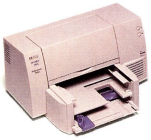
Good points

- Very fast.
- Excellent text quality.
- Print costs are very low.
- Very good instruction manual.
- Toner unit very easy to remove.

Bad points

- Quality of grey graphics is only satisfactory.
- Plastic casing contains bromine, which could lead to toxic fumes in a fire.

The printers in the *What to buy* list are profiled in rank order. Prices shown are a good target to aim for when shopping around, based on nationwide checks in April/May 1998. Anything lower is a bargain.



HEWLETT PACKARD DeskJet 890Cxi

Target price: $799

Good points

- Generally very high print quality.
- Excellent photo print quality.
- Fast at printing text.
- Equal fastest at printing photos.
- The ink cartridges are very easy to change.
- Very good instruction manual.

Bad points

- Relatively slow at printing grey graphics.

EPSON Stylus Color 400

Target price: $299

Good points

- Generally very high print quality.
- Excellent colour print quality.
- Very fast at printing grey graphics.
- Equal fastest at printing colour graphics.
- The ink cartridges are very easy to change.

Bad points

- Slow at printing text.
- Print costs are relatively high.
- Printer software comes on CD-ROM only.

HEWLETT PACKARD DeskJet 720C

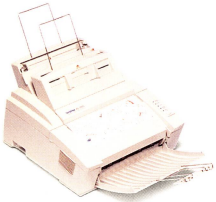
Target price: $599

Good points

- Generally very high print quality.
- Excellent photo print quality.
- Fast at printing text.
- Equal fastest at printing photos.
- The ink cartridges are very easy to change.
- Very good instruction manual.
- The quietest of all the models tested.
- Very easy access to paper jams.

Bad points

- Slow at printing grey graphics.
- Print costs are relatively high.
- You can't use it with a DOS operating system.



BROTHER HL-1060

Target price: $999

Good points

- Very fast.
- Very good text quality.
- Very versatile (see table note 9, page 47).
- Has an optional Mac interface.
- Print costs are very low.

Bad points

- Quality of grey graphics is only satisfactory.
- Plastic casing contains bromine, which could lead to toxic fumes in a fire.
- Toner unit difficult to remove. (However, laser toner cartridges usually last much longer than inkjet cartridges, and need changing less often.)
- Paper jams difficult to clean.

KYOCERA Ecosys FS-600

Target price: $685

Good points

- Very fast.
- Very good text quality.
- Very versatile.
- Print costs are very low.

Bad points

- Quality of grey graphics is only borderline.
- Some problems with paper jams during the endurance test.
- Printer software provided on CD-ROM only.
- Toner unit difficult to remove.

What about the rest?

- The **HEWLETT PACKARD DeskJet 694C** produced very high print quality. However, it was quite slow — particularly for printing grey graphics and photos.
- All the other inkjets showed a considerable drop in print quality compared to the top five models.
- The **BROTHER HL-730 Plus**, **HEWLETT PACKARD LaserJet 6L**, **OKI Oki Page 4W** and **CANON LBP660** lasers came very close to the models in the *What to buy* list for performance and ease of use. However, they were less versatile (see table note 9, page 47).
- The **PANASONIC KX-P6100** printed very fast, but produced clearly worse quality than the other lasers — even when printing text. It was also quite difficult to use, mainly due to the Windows 3.1 driver that came with the tested model, and consequent installation problems under Windows 95 (the plug-and-play feature couldn't work properly).

	Brand / model (in rank order within groups)	Manufacturer / distributor	Origin	Warranty (years)	Target price ($)*	1 Dimensions (H x W x D; mm)	2 Mac-compatible	3 Best resolution (b/w; DPI)	4 Paper trays: auto feeder (capacity) / manual feeder / paper out
	COLOUR INKJETS								
equal	**EPSON** Stylus Color 600	Epson	Japan/HK	1 (B)	449	310 x 420 x 550	✓✓	1440 x 720	100 / 0 / 1
	HEWLETT PACKARD DeskJet 890Cxi	Hewlett Packard	USA/Singapore	1	799	225 x 450 x 400		600 x 600	150 / 1 / 1
equal	**EPSON** Stylus Color 400	Epson	Japan/HK	1	299	310 x 420 x 550		720 x 720	100 / 0 / 1
	HEWLETT PACKARD DeskJet 720C	Hewlett Packard	USA/Singapore	ns	599	165 x 450 x 370		600 x 600	100 / 1 / 1
	HEWLETT PACKARD DeskJet 694C (A)	Hewlett Packard	USA/Singapore	ns	399	190 x 440 x 450		600 x 600	100 / 1 / 1
	HEWLETT PACKARD DeskJet 670C	Hewlett Packard	USA/Singapore	ns	249	190 x 440 x 420		600 x 600	100 / 1 / 1
	CANON BJC 4200 (A)	Canon	Thailand	ns	299	310 x 380 x 500		720 x 360	100 / 1 / 1
	CANON BJC 7000	Canon	Japan	1 (B)	699	330 x 460 x 460		1200 x 600	130 / 1 / 1
equal	**CANON** BJC 80	Canon	Japan	1 (B)	478	200 x 300 x 280		720 x 360	30 / 1 / 0
	EPSON Stylus Color 300	Epson	Japan/HK	1	199	360 x 380 x 220		720 x 360	100 / 0 / 0
	LEXMARK Color Jetprinter 1000	Lexmark/Intertan	ns	1	169	330 x 360 x 180		600 x 600	30 / 0 / 0
	CANON BJC 240 (A)	Canon	Thailand	ns	259	270 x 360 x 230		720 x 360	100 / 1 / 0
	BLACK-AND-WHITE LASERS								
	NEC Superscript 860 (A)	NEC	HK	3	849	300 x 370 x 510		600 x 600	200 / 1 / 1
	BROTHER HL-1060	Brother	Japan	1	999	460 x 390 x 740	✓ (D)	1200 x 600	2 x 200 / 1 / 1
	KYOCERA Ecosys FS-600	Kyocera	Japan	1 (C)	685	230 x 370 x 360		600 x 600	150 / 1 / 2
	HEWLETT PACKARD LaserJet 6L	Hewlett Packard	USA/Singapore	1	699	400 x 320 x 300		600 x 600	100 / 1 / 2
equal	**BROTHER** HL-730 Plus	Brother	China	1	549	360 x 360 x 600	✓ (D)	600 x 600	200 / 1 / 1
	CANON LBP660	Canon	Japan	1	599	420 x 330 x 300		600 x 600	100 / 1 / 2
	OKI Oki Page 4W	Oki/IPL Datron	Japan	1	395	270 x 310 x 320		300 x 1200 (E)	100 / 1 / 1
	PANASONIC KX-P6100	Panasonic	Japan	1	399	470 x 420 x 370		300 x 300	100 / 0 / 1

* Prices shown are a good target to aim for when shopping around, based on nationwide checks in April/May 1998.

** Rounded to the nearest 10 cents.

na Not applicable.

ns Not stated.

(A) According to the manufacturer, this model will be discontinued from July 1998, but you may still find it in shops.

(B) According to the manufacturer, an optional three-year warranty is available.

(C) Three years or 100,000 pages on the process unit.

(D) According to the manufacturer, the optional Mac interface costs $129.

(E) According to the manufacturer, this is comparable to 600 x 600 DPI.

(F) You change the drum whenever you change the toner cartridge, as they come as a unit.

(G) According to the manufacturer, the drum needs to be changed every 20,000 pages.

(H) According to the manufacturer, the drum doesn't need to be changed unless it becomes damaged.

(J) According to the manufacturer, the drum needs to be changed every 10,000 pages.

(K) According to the manufacturer, the drum needs to be changed every 12,000 pages.

1 Dimensions

The measurements include all paper trays fully extended.

2 Mac-compatible

All of the tested models are compatible with PCs. The model with two ticks in this column has a Mac interface as standard equipment; on models with one tick it's optional.

3 Best resolution b/w

A printer's resolution is measured in dots per inch (DPI). While it's one indicator of print quality, there are other important factors (for example, how accurately the dots are placed, and how the printer driver software interprets colours).

4 Paper trays

This tells you the capacity of the printer's auto paper feeder, whether it has a manual paper feed, and the number of out trays. Models without a paper-out tray dump the printouts directly onto the desktop.

5 Ink/toner consumption

We measured how many text pages (with 1500 characters each) per cartridge could be printed in black. Ink cartridges lasted for around 150 pages (**CANON BJC 80**) to 690 pages (**HEWLETT PACKARD DeskJet 890Cxi**), toner cartridges usually for about 1750 pages (**CANON LPB660**) to 5400 pages (**NEC Superscript 860**) — except the one in the **OKI Oki Page 4W**, which lasted only for 850 pages.

For inkjets, we also assessed the number of colour pages (we used a half-page six-colour bar chart) that could be printed per set of colour ink cartridges. For most models, the results varied from about 60 pages (**EPSON Stylus Color 300**, **LEXMARK Color Jetprinter 1000**) to about 180 pages (**HEWLETT PACKARD DeskJet 890Cxi**). The exception was the **CANON BJC 80** with only 13 pages.

We've calculated the costs per 100 pages of text, and — for inkjets — per colour page. With most lasers you'll also need to change the print drum every so often. We've included the drum costs in our calculations (the footnotes tell you the change intervals as recommended by the manufacturers).

6 Overall print speed / overall print quality

The more stars a model has in these columns, the faster it is, or the higher the quality of the printouts it produces.

5	6	6	7	8	9	10	11		
consumption ($ per 100 b/w pages; $ per colour page) **	**Overall print speed**	**Print quality**	**Performance score** (%)	**Ease of use score** (%)	**Versatility score** (%)	**Environment score** (%)	**Overall score** (%)	**Brand / model** (in rank order within groups)	
								COLOUR INKJETS	
4 / 0.6	★★★	★★★★★	80	91	100	80	86	**EPSON** Stylus Color 600	equal
8 / 0.4	★★★★	★★★★★	84	91	80	93	86	**HEWLETT PACKARD** DeskJet 890Cxi	
4 / 0.5	★★★	★★★★★	77	91	100	80	84	**EPSON** Stylus Color 400	equal
4 / 0.5	★★★	★★★★★	80	92	80	93	84	**HEWLETT PACKARD** DeskJet 720C	
9 / 0.5	★★	★★★★★	71	90	87	80	79	**HEWLETT PACKARD** DeskJet 694C (A)	
4 / 0.6	★★★	★★★	65	89	80	93	76	**HEWLETT PACKARD** DeskJet 670C	
8 / 0.9	★★★	★★★	64	84	87	70	73	**CANON** BJC 4200 (A)	
0 / 0.3	★★	★★★★	64	86	60	53	68	**CANON** BJC 7000	
9 / 1.3	★★★	★★★	68	68	60	60	66	**CANON** BJC 80	equal
2 / 0.5	★	★★★★	56	84	80	53	66	**EPSON** Stylus Color 300	
2 / 2.0	★★★	★★★	62	69	60	73	65	**LEXMARK** Color Jetprinter 1000	
8 / 0.6	★★	★★★	55	80	60	70	64	**CANON** BJC 240 (A)	
								BLACK-AND-WHITE LASERS	
5 / na (F)	★★★★★	★★★★	88	84	87	75	86	**NEC** Superscript 860 (A)	
8 / na (G)	★★★★★	★★★★	82	82	100	53	82	**BROTHER** HL-1060	
4 / na (H)	★★★★★	★★★	79	75	100	80	81	**KYOCERA** Ecosys FS-600	
8 / na (F)	★★★★★	★★★	79	87	80	60	79	**HEWLETT PACKARD** LaserJet 6L	
8 / na (G)	★★★★★	★★★★	80	82	80	53	78	**BROTHER** HL-730 Plus	equal
0 / na (F)	★★★★★	★★★★	84	83	60	60	78	**CANON** LBP660	
0 / na (J)	★★★★★	★★★★	82	67	67	75	75	**OKI** Oki Page 4W	
4 / na (K)	★★★★★	★★★	76	55	60	80	69	**PANASONIC** KX-P6100	

If you have an older, relatively slow computer, the data transfer to the printer is likely to be the main factor determining the print speed. However, in our tests we used a PC with a 266 MHz Pentium II chip, which provides so much processing power that the speed of the printer becomes the limiting factor.

We printed the following documents, and compared the results to prints from professional printing equipment:

- Lasers and inkjets: text; monochrome (grey) graphics.
- Inkjets only: colour graphics at normal-resolution mode; colour graphics at high-resolution mode; a colour photo.

See *Speed and quality*, page 43, for more details on how the printers performed in the various tasks.

7 Performance score

This is a combination of print speed, print quality and manufacturing quality (for example, we noted any problems the printers had during the tests — such as ink blockages or paper jams).

8 Ease of use score

We assessed the following:

- Completeness and comprehensibility of the printer's instruction manual and online help.
- Ease of setting it up.
- Ease of use of its software (drivers).
- Ease of loading paper in the in trays, and retrieving paper from the out trays.
- Ease of operating and maintaining the printer.

9 Versatility score

This score shows how the models compare in terms of features and functions. Printers scored points for features like paper in and out trays, paper sizes and different stationery they can print on, and whether they can be used with both PCs and Macs.

10 Environment score

We checked whether the printers' plastic casings contain potentially hazardous substances, assessed how much energy they use and how noisy they are. See *Environmental imprint*, page 44.

11 Overall score

The overall score is a combination of the performance, ease of use, versatility and environment scores, weighted as follows:

- Performance: 50%.
- Ease of use: 25%.
- Versatility: 15%.
- Environment: 10%.

Some of the printers were tested in 1997, and the results were previously published in *Computer* CHOICE (Sept/Oct 1997). As the 1998 test program was changed slightly compared to last year's, the ratings for those models had to be adjusted. If you compare their overall results in *Computer* CHOICE and in this table, you may notice minor differences.

A good example of four-colour printing from the Hewlett Packard DeskJet 720C.

RECALLS & BANS

If you find a recall or ban not on our list, please let us know. Companies often rent 1800 numbers for a couple of months after the recall is announced. If the number given is no longer operating, phone the manufacturer or retailer direct.

THE PRODUCT: Allfect has recalled **individually wrapped Ghost Drops Lollies, 4.5 g**, with a best-before date of December 1999, sold loose at minor retail outlets across Australia (mini-markets, milk bars, service stations, for example).

The problem: Some of the lollies may contain metal shavings.

What to do: Don't eat them. Return them to the point of purchase for a full refund. For more information, contact Allfect on (02) 9748 1100.

THE PRODUCT: NEC has recalled the **AC Adaptor Battery Charger** used with the NEC Fido GSM mobile phone, and sold nationally.

The problem: A technical fault may cause the battery charger to malfunction and overheat.

What to do: A new battery charger will be sent by mail to all customers who own this mobile phone. For more information contact 13 16 32.

THE PRODUCT: Southcott has recalled some **Robinson/GT BMX bikes** and **bicycle frames**, sold nationally.

The problem: The top tube of the frame may fail due to metal fatigue when subjected to ramp/dirt jumping.

What to do: All buyers of new bikes have been notified. For more information contact Southcott on (03) 9555 2155.

THE PRODUCT: Coca-Cola South Pacific has recalled **Coca-Cola promotional footballs** with the Coca-Cola trademark, sold nationally at BP service stations.

The problem: The football may burst when being inflated or kicked.

What to do: Return it to the place of purchase for a full refund. For more information, contact 1800 025 123.

THE PRODUCT: Cannon has recalled the **Cannon Babysafe Clear Ventilated Soother** with a regular rubber teat (not ortho or silicone) and in a single blister pack on a white card, with a picture of a teddy bear, a balloon and baby photo.

The problem: The product in this particular packaging is more than two years old and could be harmful, as the teat may separate from the shield and ring.

What to do: Return the soother to the place of purchase for a refund or exchange. For more information call (02) 9436 0723.

THE PRODUCT: CSL has recalled the following batches of the **EpiPen Adrenaline Auto Injector** and the **EpiPen Jr Adrenaline Auto Injector**, which have been issued to customers since October 1997:

- **EpiPen:**
  7SR265, expiry 8/99
  7SR293, expiry 9/99
  7SR318, expiry 10/99
  7SR356, expiry 11/99
  7SR358, expiry 12/99
  7SR371, expiry 12/99
  7SR378, expiry 12/99
- **EpiPen Jr:**
  7JR289, expiry 8/99
  7JR290, expiry 8/99
  7JR323, expiry 10/99
  7JR361, expiry 11/99
  7JR375, expiry 12/99

The problem: Some of the auto injectors used for emergency treatment of severe allergic reactions may contain a dose of adrenaline which would be ineffective in a medical emergency.

What to do: Don't use the injector. Return it immediately to the place of purchase for a free replacement. If a replacement is not immediately available, see your doctor. For more information, contact CSL on 1800 333 011.

THE PRODUCT: Breville has recalled model **BB200 Bakers Oven Breadmakers** with a batch number of 744 or lower. The model number and batch number are on the base of the breadmaker — the batch number is a three-digit number heat-stamped into the plastic base near the voltage rating label.

The problem: If a fault occurs on the power circuit board it may result in arcing, which in turn could lead to overheating, with risk of serious damage.

What to do: Don't use the breadmaker. Take it to your nearest Breville service centre for free inspection and service. Breville service centres are listed on the breadmaker's warranty card. For further information, call the Breville customer service centre on 1800 702 002, Monday to Friday, 8 am to 8 pm EST.

THE PRODUCT: LEGO has recalled the **LEGO Primo Ladybird rattle** (art. no. 2093).

The problem: The rattle can create a choking risk.

What to do: Stop using it immediately. Return it to the place of purchase or any other retail outlet that sells Lego products for a full refund. For more information call the Lego Consumer Hotline on: 1800 683 100; or visit the company's Website: www.lego.com/parents

PRODUCT SAFETY NOTICE

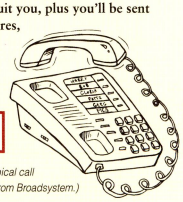
THE PRODUCT: Toyworld has issued a safety notice for **M A Henry three or four-unit model swing sets**, purchased from it in 1997 and fitted with U bolts.

The problem: Some of the U bolts are susceptible to breakage and could cause injury.

What to do: If your swing set is fitted with U bolts, stop using it immediately. Contact your Toyworld store for a replacement bolt assembly and instructions on how to make the changeover of bolts. Evidence of purchase is requested. For more information contact Associated Retailers on (03) 9429 8266.

Save yourself $'000s for less than $10

We'll tell you which home loan is really the cheapest for a new home loan or refinancing your existing loan. Call 1900 17 00 88 any time and you'll hear the five cheapest loans to suit you, plus you'll be sent a list of up to 40 loans with all their features, including interest rates, fees and charges and honeymoon offers.



CHOICE MONEYLINE

Call 1900 17 00 88

Calls cost $1.95 a minute (more from mobile phones). Typical call costs are under $10. (Data from Cannex; phone service from Broadsystem.)

Order Form

CHOICE Products

Australian Consumers' Association 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville NSW 2204 **Phone** Subscriptions: (02) 9577 3277 General: (02) 9577 3333 **Fax:** (02) 9577 3355

Subscriptions

		Cost $	Qty Self	Qty Gift	Amount
CHOICE *(11 issues a year)*					
1 year	52	Personal subscription	....	....	.....
2 years	97		....	....	.....
1 year	70	Company/institution	....	....	.....
2 years	132		....	....	.....
Overseas add $12 for 1 year and $22 for 2 years					
Consuming Interest *(4 issues a year)*					
1 year	27	Personal subscription	....	....	.....
2 years	50		....	....	.....
1 year	35	Company/institution	....	....	.....
2 years	67		....	....	.....
Overseas add $6 for 1 year and $10 for 2 years					
CHOICE Travel *(4 issues a year)*					
1 year	27	Personal subscription	....	....	.....
2 years	50		....	....	.....
1 year	35	Company/institution	....	....	.....
2 years	67		....	....	.....
Overseas add $6 for 1 year and $10 for 2 years					
CHOICE Health Reader *(10 issues a year)*					
1 year	50	Personal subscription	....	....	.....
2 years	94		....	....	.....
1 year	72	Professional/institution	....	....	.....
2 years	134		....	....	.....
Overseas add $12 for 1 year and $22 for 2 years					
Computer CHOICE *(6 issues a year)*					
1 year	32	*If you subscribe to CHOICE or another of our publications*	....	....	.....
2 years	60		....	....	.....
1 year	36	*Computer* CHOICE alone	....	....	.....
2 years	68		....	....	.....
1 year	48	Professional/institution	....	....	.....
2 years	90		....	....	.....
Overseas add $8 for 1 year and $14 for 2 years					
CHOICEFax					
Single article	6	Subscriber	....	....	.....
	16	Non-subscriber	....	....	.....

Article title: .....

Issue date: ..... Fax no: .....

Filing systems

		Colour			
Box holder *(holds 24)*	12	Red	....	....	.....
		Blue	....	....	.....
Binder *(holds 12)*	12	Red	....	....	.....
		Black	....	....	.....
Health Reader binder *(holds 2 years)*	12	White	....	....	.....

Order Total .....

Payment method

I wish to pay by ❑ Cheque ❑ Money Order
(payable to Australian Consumers' Association)

or, I wish to pay by ❑ Bankcard ❑ Mastercard ❑ Visa ❑ Amex ❑ Diners Club

Card number

Name on card ..... Expiry date ...../.....

Signature .....

Mr/Mrs/Miss/Ms ..... Subs. no. .....

Address .....

..... Postcode .....

Include me in Subscriber Draw ❑ Yes ❑ No Telephone .....

Gift recipient details:

Mr/Mrs/Miss/Ms .....

Address .....

..... Postcode .....

Gift card to read: .....

To ..... From .....

Send gift renewal notice to me ❑ Yes ❑ No

To speed your order, attach your CHOICE mailing label or write in your subscriber number where noted above.

Back issues.

Subscribers can buy back issues for $6 each. Non-subscribers can purchase back issues for $16 per copy. Write to CHOICE Consumer Information, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204, or phone (02) 9577 3399.

Subscription problems or changes of address.

Write to Subscriptions Department, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204, phone (02) 9577 3277, fax (02) 9577 3355 or email to ausconsumer@choice.com.au Please include your subscriber number (found in the top corner of your CHOICE address label) or have it ready by you when you phone us.

INS/9807

If your subscription is due to expire — renew now!

32nd SUBSCRIBER DRAW

Every subscriber who renews their subscription to one of our magazines between July 1 and July 31 will automatically be entered to win a VCR valued at up to $399.

Prizes for our draws are products we bought for testing, so you won't be the first to turn them on or set them up. But we'll cover any service problems with a CHOICE warranty that'll match the manufacturer's — just as if you'd bought them new.

Conditions apply to the draw: call (02) 9577 3399 for details.

NSW permit No. TC 98/1693, ACT permit No. TP 97/2425, NT permit No. NT 98/361.

The winners of the 29th Subscriber Draw are T&M Walter of Wulguru, Queensland.

STAFF AND DEPARTMENTS

Chief executive officer: Louise Sylvan.
Executive assistant: Penny Tucker.
CHOICE: Editor Jane Mackenzie. **Deputy editor** Jane Inglis.
Writers/journalists this issue Birgitt Baader, Rosanne Bersten, Karina Bray, Daniel Coyne, Anna George, Michael Hohl, Sally Nathan.
CHOICE BOOKS: Publisher Keren Lavelle. **Senior editor** Jan Bradley. **Editor/marketer** Tracey McTeare.
CHOICE ONLINE: Manager Liz Munn.
COMPUTER CHOICE: Editor Rosanne Bersten.
Technical editor Peter Dower. **Journalist** Chris Ruggles.
CONSUMING INTEREST: Editor Peter Cerexhe.
PRODUCTION: Art director Michelle Havenstein. **Co-ordinator** Rohan Hills.
Designers Merryn Stapleton, Jeff Young. **Photographer** Rhonda Thwaite.
CONSUMER RESEARCH: Manager Mary Harris. Jan Bouhali, Leanne Croker, Kate Murdoch, Christine Shaday, Joe Sydney, Livian Wong.
Buying Dorothy Kneale, Jan Rigby.
TECHNICAL RESEARCH: Manager Alan Sharp. **Products Research: Manager** Klaus Neuscheler. Antonio Bonacruz, Brian Champion, Geoff Day, Robert Greig, Victor Guerreiro, Michael Hohl, Peter Horvath, Martha Josephakis, David Lovejoy, Simon Murr, Bill Psiroukis, Raja Rajagopal.
RESEARCH TEAMS: Development Manager Norm Crothers.
Food, Health, Environment team Annette Coburn, Fiona Mair, Sally Nathan, Matt O'Neill, Carole Renouf, Anna Sallen.
Information Technology, Communications team Rosanne Bersten, Peter Dower, Stephen Horrocks, Chris Ruggles.
Money, Legal team Kate Beddoe, Anna George, Peter Kell.
Marketing statistics by GfK Marketing Services.
Financial information supplied by Cannex.
POLICY AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS: Manager Mara Bún.
Senior media co-ordinator Gail Kennedy.
QUALITY ASSURANCE AND CONTROL: Manager Barbara Manchester.
Verification co-ordinator Pam Gardiner. **Verifiers** Elizabeth Hurtt, Kathleen MacDonald, Mark McKenzie, David Oakenfull.
MARKETING: Manager Janice McEwen. **Assistant** Kylie Wingrave.
FINANCE AND PROPERTY: Manager Alan Johnston.
Accounts Ron Carrall, Jeanette Dwyer, Samantha Dwyer, Sharon Schilling.
CUSTOMER SERVICE: Manager Robert Jensen. **Deputy manager** Jenni Noble. **CHOICE Consumer Information** Sandra Leach, Carilee Breckenridge, Kim Laurie, Kathy Petrou, Elizabeth Poole, Leigh Ramsey.
Information Resource Centre/Administration Maria Athanasatos, Shirley Colless, Yvonne Lyon, Nicole Mark, Audra Pearse, Jeanette Porter, Roslyn Sydney, Meagan Turner.
Executive assistant – Policy and media Robyn Miller.
Information technology Stephen Macdonald.
Subscriptions Thelma Bracken, Jaye Graves, Lalo Hepehi, Nootaya Hwang, Fiona Pollard. **Assistant** Peter Griffin.

The Association is governed by an honorary Council elected by the voting members. (For information about voting membership, contact CHOICE Consumer Information on (02) 9577 3399.) Members of the Council give their time without reimbursement, and are not engaged as principals in industry, advertising or sales.

COUNCIL: Chair Associate Professor Simon Chapman PhD. **Deputy Chair** Diane Hill FCA. **Members** Rob Asser BSc (Arch), BArch, Grad Dip Ed (Art); Allan Barton PhD; Professor George Bennett BA, PhD, ASTC; John Braithwaite; Cynthia Cliff BSc (Hons), PhD, Dip Env Stud, Grad Dip Outdoor Ed, Grad Dip Bus Admin, MRACI, C Chem; Professor Graham de Vahl Davis AM, FTS, BE, PhD; Patrick Griffin BA, LLB; Ian Lowe BSc, DPhil; Jenni Mack; Phil Marchionni; Ann Montague BA, MEd; Suzanne Russell MBA, BEd (Home Economics); Graeme Wiffen BA, LLM; John T D Wood BArch, FRAIA.

The Australian Consumers' Association is a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee. ACN 000 281 925.

Registered office 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204.
Telephone (02) 9577 3333. **Fax** (02) 9577 3377.
Subscription enquiries (02) 9577 3277.
CHOICE Consumer Information (02) 9577 3399.
email address ausconsumer@choice.com.au
World Wide Web address www.choice.com.au

ABOUT THE AUSTRALIAN CONSUMERS' ASSOCIATION

The Australian Consumers' Association is a non-profit, non-party-political organisation, established in 1959 to provide consumers with information and advice on goods, services, health and personal finances, and to help maintain and enhance the quality of life for consumers. It is a Council member of Consumers International.

We are completely independent. We buy all the products we test at random in the marketplace; we never accept products to be tested as gifts or loans from manufacturers or retailers. We are not beholden to any commercial, government or union interests, and we don't accept advertising, paid or unpaid. Our income is derived from the sale of CHOICE and our other publications and products.

We test and rate products and services. Our ratings are usually based on quality without regard to price, and are derived from lab tests, expert judgments and reader surveys. If a product is high in quality and relatively low in price, we deem it a **Best Buy**. A rating applies only to the brand and model tested, not to other models sold under the same brand name, unless so noted. We can't conduct special tests or provide information about tested products beyond what appears in CHOICE. Financial information in CHOICE is of a general nature, and is not intended to be advice on individual investments which should or should not be made.

'No commercial use' policy. Our ratings and reports may not be used in advertising or for any other commercial purpose. The Consumers' Association will take all steps open to it to prevent commercial use of its materials, its name, and the name of CHOICE or our other publications. Please report any apparent violation to the Consumers' Association, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204; phone (02) 9577 3399; fax (02) 9577 3355.

We represent and act in consumers' interests. We lobby and campaign on behalf of consumers to promote their rights, to influence government policy, and to ensure consumer issues have a high profile in the public arena.

Membership. Subscribers can become voting members of the Consumers' Association on application. Membership costs $79 per year, which covers your subscription to CHOICE and a further subscription to our consumer policy and campaigning magazine, *Consuming Interest*.

Permissions. Reproduction of CHOICE, CHOICE Books and other CHOICE publications, in whole or in part, is forbidden without prior written permission (and is never permitted for commercial purposes). Address requests to CHOICE Consumer Information at the above address.

Mailing lists. We never sell the CHOICE mailing lists to other organisations.

CONSUMERS' ASSOCIATION PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

CHOICE (published 11 times per year). CHOICE is a registered trademark of the Australian Consumers' Association. For information on subscription and back issues, see the order form on page 49.

CHOICE Online provides access to online consumer information covering all aspects of the Consumers' Association's work. It includes consumer discussion forums and searchable recall and ban information.

CHOICE Books publishes non-fiction titles on a wide range of topics, with a consumer perspective. **Consumer Bookshelf** offers both CHOICE Books and material from other publishers by mail order.

COMPUTER CHOICE (published bi-monthly) provides information and tests for home computer users.

CONSUMING INTEREST, our quarterly policy and campaigning magazine, provides reports, analysis, opinion and debates on consumer issues. It also gives updates on the lobbying and campaign projects of the Consumers' Association.

CHOICE Health Reader (published 10 times per year) gives you the latest findings on nutrition, exercise and all branches of medicine and health care, compiled from up to 200 international scientific journals.

CHOICE Travel is produced by the UK Consumers' Association and reprinted by CHOICE four times a year. Its reports are independent in the same style as CHOICE and, while they're written from the perspective of a European base, most of the information in them is just as useful to travelling Australians.

CHOICEFax supplies faxed copies of many CHOICE and *Computer* CHOICE articles for $6 per article to subscribers, $16 to non-subscribers. Call (02) 9577 3277 to order by credit card.

CHOICEMONEYLINE gives accurate and independent credit information by phone. It provides up-to-date details about the most competitive home loans, personal loans, overdrafts and credit cards from banking institutions in your area. The information can also be faxed. Call 1900 17 00 88. (Calls cost $1.95 per minute. Mobile phones have higher rates. Data from Cannex; phone service from Broadsystem).

Test Research provides fee-for-service testing and research on consumer products, services and regulatory issues for other consumer organisations, government and industry.

Manager: Raja Rajagopal. **Contact:** Jeanette Dwyer on (02) 9577 3333.

Twelve-month INDEX

August 1997 — July 1998

How to use this index
Bold type indicates a test, survey or trial report, normal type indicates other articles.
* indicates an update of a previous report, additions or corrections to reports, small follow-up items or letters.
For space reasons, the index generally doesn't include Choice Cuts, many other small pieces, and Recalls and Bans.

Advertorials and infomercials Jul
Agricultural investments / scams Jul
Air conditioners, reverse-cycle **Nov**
Airlines, satisfaction with **Oct**
Aluminium foil and plastic wrap **Aug**
Annual buying guide **Dec**
Answering machines **May**
Anti-aging treatments Jul
Antibiotics, resistance to Apr

Baby carriers **Jun**
Backpacks, day **Apr**
Banks
  electronic banking Mar, May*
  free banking Mar, May*
  interest rates Jan/Feb
  satisfaction with **Mar**
Bathroom heat lamps **Apr**
Blankets, electric **May**
Building disputes Apr
Buying guide, annual **Dec**

Calcium, your intake Aug
Canned food, value for money **Oct**
Caring in the home Jun
Carriers, baby **Jun**
Cars
  cleaning Sep
  crash tests, high-speed Sep
  crash tests, low-speed May
  jumper leads **Mar**
  lemon laws May
  motor oils and additives **Oct**
  renting Dec, Jun*
  servicing under warranty Jul
Cash management trusts May
CD players, multidisc **Mar**
CDs, cost of Nov
Certification schemes for
  products Apr, Jun*
Chardonnay **Dec**
Cheese, reduced-fat cheddar **May**
Childbirth options Aug, Jan/Feb*
CHOICE, saving price of subscription Jul
Computers
  Internet, 'number unobtainable' charges May
  millennium bug Jun
  notebooks **Dec**
  printers **Jul**
  stores going out of business Jul
  tips for buying Dec
  upgrading Apr
Contact lenses and glasses Mar
Cooktops, gas with wok burner **Jan/Feb**
Corkscrews **Dec**
Cots standard, mandatory Jan/Feb
Credit cards Nov, Jan/Feb*

Day backpacks **Apr**
Detergents, laundry **Apr**, Jun*
Digital television May
Dishwasher, two-drawer **Jul**
Doner kebabs **Sep**
Drills, impact **Aug**

Eggs, choosing Nov
Electric blankets **May**
Electronic banking Mar
Ethical investing Jan/Feb

Fax machines, plain-paper **Oct**, Mar*
Fertilisers Nov
Financial
  advertisements, misleading Jun
  disasters, learning from Apr
Fire safety in the home Oct
Fish, incl. fish fingers / portions **Mar**
Fluoride in water Aug, Nov*
Food
  calcium, your intake Aug
  canned, value for money **Oct**
  cheese, reduced-fat cheddar **May**
  doner kebabs **Sep**
  eggs, choosing Nov
  fish, incl. fish fingers / portions **Mar**
  labelling Apr
  organic Jan/Feb
  poisoning Sep
  potatoes **Jun**, Jul*
  safety Sep
Fridges, 480-520 L **Mar**
Funerals Sep

Gadgets, kitchen Dec
Gas cooktops with a wok burner **Jan/Feb**
Genetic testing and insurance May
Glasses and contact lenses Mar
'Green' power Dec
GST Oct

Health
  antibiotics, resistance to Apr
  calcium, your intake Aug
  childbirth options Aug
  fluoride in water Aug, Nov*
  hormone-disrupting chemicals Oct
  insurance **Aug**
  laser eye surgery Jul
  mobile phones, EMR Jan/Feb
  vacuum cleaners, asthma and allergy claims **Aug**
Healthcare
  Budget changes Jul
  caring in the home Jun
  compared to US May
  PBS changes Jun
  system in crisis? Nov, Mar*, Apr*
Heat lamps, bathroom **Apr**
Hi-fis, mini **Dec**
Home insulation **Aug**
Hormone-disrupting chemicals Oct

Impact drills **Aug**
Income protection insurance **Nov**
Index, four-year Jun
Infomercials and advertorials Jul
Insulation **Aug**
  genetic testing May
  health **Aug**
  income protection **Nov**
Inter-city transport Jun
Internet, 'number unobtainable' charges May
Investing
  agricultural / scams Jul
  cash management trusts May
  ethical Jan/Feb
  property Oct
  shares Nov
  understanding unit trust prospectuses Sep

Jumper leads **Mar**

Kitchen gadgets Dec

Ladders, step, step-extension and multi-purpose **Dec**
Laser eye surgery Jul
Laundry detergents **Apr**, Jun*
Lawnmowers, petrol, mulching **Nov**
Lemon laws for cars May

Medicare
  Budget changes Jul
  compared to US May
  system in crisis? Nov
Millennium bug Jun
Mini hifis **Dec**
Mobile phones
  digital **Jan/Feb**, Apr*
  EMR Jan/Feb
Money scams Jun
Motor oils Oct

Notebook computers **Dec**

Oils, motor **Oct**
Organic food Jan/Feb

Packaging, size vs value Jun
Paper products, labelling May
Pay TV Oct
PBS changes Jun
Petrol lawnmowers, mulching **Nov**
Phones
  mobile, digital **Jan/Feb**, Apr*
  mobile, EMR Jan/Feb
Plastic wrap and aluminium foil **Aug**
Poisoning, food Sep
Potatoes **Jun**, Jul*
Power, 'green' Dec
Pramettes **Sep**
Prescription drugs, cheaper Jun
Printers, computer **Jul**
Product certification schemes Apr, Jun*
Property investment Oct
Prospectuses, unit trusts Sep

Refrigerators — see Fridges
Rental cars Dec, Jun*
Retirement villages Apr
Reverse-cycle air conditioners **Nov**

Saucepans **Jan/Feb**
Scams
  agricultural investments Jul
  money Jun
Share investment Nov
Shopping
  bulk buying, is it cheaper? Jun
  convenience store vs supermarket prices **Apr**
  supermarket price survey **Jul**
Shopping rights Sep
Smoke alarms **Oct**, Dec*
Soaps Jun
Spectacles and contact lenses Mar
Stereos, mini **Dec**
Sunscreens, SPF 30+ Dec
Supermarkets
  price survey **Jul**
  sales tactics Jan/Feb

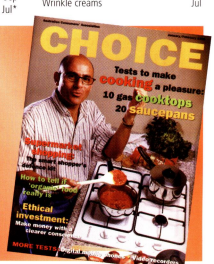
Telephones — see Phones
Television, digital May
Televisions, 51 cm **May**, Jul*
Thermometers, electronic **Mar**, May*
Transport, inter-city Jun

Vacuum cleaners
  asthma and allergy claims **Aug**
  standard **Jul**
VCRs, mid-price **Jan/Feb**, Apr*

Washing machines, 5-6 kg stated capacity, under $1200 **Sep**
Water, fluoride in Aug, Nov*
Woks **Jun**
Wrinkle creams Jul

Looking for an article?

You can order back issues of CHOICE or we can fax you a single article. Order form on page 49.


CHOICE
Tests to make cooking a pleasure:
10 gas cooktops
20 saucepans
Supermarket price survey
The latest shopping trends
How to tell the organic from the really dirty
Ethical investments:
Make money while you clean up the environment
MORE TESTS: digital TVs, vacuum cleaners

Biting the dust

Agricultural investments have a high-risk reputation, so what should you watch out for if a scheme looks attractive?

BLUEBOTTLE FARMS, LAND AND AIRspace packages, and goat/sheep crossbreeding programs — do they sound like good investments to you?

They were in fact featured in dummy ads placed in newspapers around the country in April by the Australian Securities and Investment Commission (ASIC, the financial services regulator, formerly known as the ASC), but they looked attractive enough for more than 700 potential customers to ring up wanting to invest. This bore out ASIC's concerns about the vulnerability of small investors to the sort of claims made in ads like these.

Of course, CHOICE readers are well-informed on the nature of risky investments (see *Learning from financial disasters*, April 1998, and *Get rich when?*, June 1998). But it's of concern that such a high number of consumers nationwide believed the promises of a 30–50% return were realistic or achievable.

Although we've just passed the traditional end-of-financial-year advertising of agricultural investment schemes that offer high returns with a tax break, they remain an issue.

Livestock schemes such as ostrich farming have long had a questionable reputation, but there are other agricultural investments, involving small vineyards, olive, worm, blue gum or tea tree farms, which also attract the interest of the regulators.

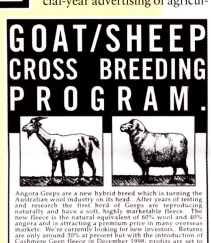
It's their somewhat optimistic forecasts that can spark suspicion, because projections may be based on less than solid evidence. These are, after all, speculative investments.

Agricultural schemes are known legally as managed investments (also called pooled or prescribed-interest investments), and are regulated by the Corporations Law.

Such schemes have often been promoted as being able to reduce your tax bill. But it's worth noting the ASIC warning that many of these investments will fail. Get the ASIC brochure, *Primary production schemes* (contact details below), if an agricultural scheme has caught your eye and you're thinking of investing in it.

INVEST IN THE FUTURE
LAND & AIRSPACE PACKAGES.
THE SKY'S THE LIMIT!
A limited number of land and air space packages are being sold off to help fund further airport developments. The land has been zoned industrial and is available to 5 acre lots only. Located directly under the flight path the air space is currently earning huge fly over fees and as the Olympic Games draw closer the projected earnings are set to explode. If you have $50,000 to $100,000 now, call Aerobase Enterprises for a contract today on 1300 300 630 for the rest of a local call. Loan options are available for certain clients.

MINIMISE TAX!!!
MAXIMISE PROFITS!!!
BLUEBOTTLE FARMS
50% RETURN
Until recently Bluebottles were something to be avoided. Now, after a breakthrough medical research, the possums that have plagued us with respiratory problems are now being used in a whole range of medicinal products. Demand for Bluebottle fleece has been dramatic and this new Bluebottle-based medicine will be available in Australia by the year 2000. The next two years will see huge growth in the industry. Don't miss the projected profits or phenomenal returns. Be prepared to invest or you can minimise your tax and earn a guaranteed 50% return. Contact Bluebottle Farms Pty Ltd, Sydney on 1300 360 820.


GOAT/SHEEP CROSS BREEDING PROGRAM.
Angora Geeps are a new hybrid breed which is turning the Australian wool industry on its head. After years of testing and research the first herd of Geeps are reproducing naturally and have a soft, highly marketable fleece. The new fleece is the natural equivalent of 60% wool and 40% angora and is attracting a premium price in many overseas markets. We're currently looking for new investors. Returns are projected to be 50% per annum. The first shearing of the Cashmere Geep fleece in December 1998, profits are set to soar. For more information contact Australian Rural Textiles on 1300 300 630 for the cost of a local call.
SECURE YOUR FUTURE WITH GEEPS!
Please note: This is not a real investment. Contact 1300 300 630.

These hoax ads attracted interested investors from around the country — showing that Australian consumers may need to exercise a bit more healthy scepticism when looking at investment opportunities.

Information before you invest

Some agricultural schemes will deliver good returns — but the risks are high. You need to be extra-scrupulous in checking and understanding the detail of a scheme. Some necessary precautions include:

- Reading a current prospectus registered by ASIC. This is required to give you all the information that you would reasonably need to make an informed decision about the investment, although ASIC won't endorse the company's claims. If there is no prospectus or trust deed, sign nothing and don't invest until you check with the ASIC infoline on 1300 300 630 whether the investment needs a prospectus.
- Getting advice from a licensed investment adviser (not just the one who's promoting the scheme) and possibly a legal adviser as well.
- Finding out whether there are yearly maintenance fees and considering your capacity to meet them.
- Knowing how long you would need to invest to obtain a satisfactory return — for example, some crops take many years to reach maturity. With some investments, it may also be difficult to sell them quickly. ❑